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Introduction: Living June Jordan

"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 Parasite."

June Jordan, "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person"¹

We are surrounded. We who are in the academy, looking for community, like June Jordan and her students in 1969, are still surrounded. We have also made it inside the gate, but we are now cornered. This place, the university, is the destination, they said. We were told that we had to be inside or else. And now that we are here, they lie to us. Just as they lied to Jordan's students. Just as they lied to the Black professors they hired when they demanded teachers less likely to lie. Just as they lied to the Black teachers who went to college in order to teach those Black professors long before 1969. They lied about us. About why we are here, how we got here, and what it means to be here. Although they would eventually again shut the gates, some of us made it through and have been here for a long time now. Which means we have listened to these lies for a long time now. The lies have changed. But they are still lies.

Every now and then, there is a slip, an exposure, a seam opens. We seize on those moments because the lie that sustains what Jordan called

this system's "exploitation of human life, for material gain" cannot exist forever.² We say, we believe. We enter a tradition of recognizing that this place and its knowledges are all "a logical bundling of lies that mutilate and kill."³ That knowledge we call "normative," "objective," and therefore "universal" is not only or simply a fiction or construct; it is a mechanism of power, a force that imposes a particular kind of regime of truth on those who they lie about, who are said to have no knowledge to counter the lie. As we have queried the meaning of these lies, we have come up with many answers. Even as there are deeper questions we know we should ask.

But sometimes it feels like there are too few of us. Left alone, left with questions unanswered, some of us feel we have to participate in the lies in order to make do. The excuses mount. We turn our contempt inward. We call ourselves impostors. We rationalize other kinds of harms, perhaps believing that in the end, the academy's rewards will suit us just fine. When we have been inside the gates for so long, there is a tendency to adjust.

But even this self-criticism has its limits. For it is the gates that surround us. It is not us—it is them. It is the gates that suffocate the life out of us. It is the gates that suppress our desires, assaults our capacities to evacuate the lies out of us. We are not the problem, though we have been told this over and over. And we have suffered for so long as *their* conception of the problem. The gates have enforced the logics of coloniality and state power. It is the settler and the police that guard these gates. Who then teach us their knowledges. Only they call themselves scholars. Yet their ideas manifest harm. For it is their job.

In the face of such duress, such pervasive hardship, such overwhelming trauma, we must build spaces to re-member that we Black folk have a tradition of recognizing that it is all a lie.

Of Black Study is a re-membling of that tradition through the lens and lives of four Black intellectuals who questioned the lie at its most fundamental core: the very meaning of knowledge.⁴ They came to the university with questions. Questions that were not simply driven by why Black folk caught hell, not simply why poverty existed, not simply why there were disparities, lack, deprivation, deviance—not simply *if* we were in fact surrounded. They asked questions like how the nature of knowledge and knowing itself became the structure that housed the lies. How the architecture of the lie was not inherent in the lie itself. How it must have come from some logic that preceded it. So it was not enough to

respond to the sorts of lies Jordan wrote about with simple “corrections,” to ask whether the liars believed themselves to be telling the truth, to ask whether they understood what it was they were saying about us. There are lies and there are intellectual traditions founded on lies. There is dishonesty and there is a whole philosophy of life premised on particular assumptions of who we are. There is bad faith and then there is a panoply of interests served by the lie for those who require them. In other words, asking what produces the lie, rather than what constitutes the lie, is a more necessary response than simply refuting the lie. For the lie, this capacity for lying, is the very idea of the West.

* * *

June Jordan was writing during a time of great promise. At City College, alongside Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Toni Cade Bambara—the latter of whom told her on her first day of teaching, “Anything you have to give, just give it to them ... They’ll be grateful for it”—she met students who would struggle to create a “Free University” and attempt to “realize the dream of a Black University.” In order to do so, they would have to shut down the college as it had been known before.⁵ It was a moment where Black and “Third World” students were not only critical of the lie but had begun to think of alternative, otherwise forms of thinking and creating. One should never forget the roles of the artists and poets, many of whom were the original Black Studies faculty members. Their students were the ones who would continue that creative push to narrate Black life in the pages of the many Black Studies newsletters and organs and on the lists of Black publishing houses, eventually creating one of the most important moments of literary production in the seventies and eighties.

That now celebrated, if still misunderstood, struggle for a Black writing, free of a white gaze emerged from Black spaces and was affirmed in Black spaces.⁶ Black Studies was such a Black space. And this meant something much more profound than the racialized signifier of “Black” that was violently created to order human groups. It was about experience. There was the lie, and then there was *life*—living. This struggle for life was oriented toward a declaration, synthesized beautifully by Jordan’s poetic invocation: “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.”⁷ We could oppose the lie. And then live. Maybe Black Studies could become something like “White studies: Revised.” But there was the question of whether or not the university truly had the capacity to do this work for and with us. Could it be a space that moved against its tradition of affirming the rationality of plunder and pain? Could it “teach us something new”?⁸

Most of us can say now that it most likely cannot. But fewer of us seem to be able to explain why. There is much to learn from Jordan’s insistence on asking the question in the way she did and the conversations it might lead to concerning where we are. Such conversations should in fact take us far beyond the logic of the curriculum as it had always existed, far beyond the disciplines that structured the academy, and far beyond the philosophical foundation on which those disciplines depended. For what underpinned Jordan’s questioning was a groping for the deeper questions of life. We once knew the university for what it was, for what it was teaching. We once knew that we could not accept it. As Jordan put it: “How shall we humanly compose the knowledge that troubles the mind into ideas of life? How can be who we are?”⁹ We once knew that the curriculum was blind to such questions of life. It had been too implicated in our deaths. We once knew Black Studies as a struggle for a “life appealing to live, and to be, and to know a community that will protect the living simply because we are alive.”¹⁰ We once knew that. And we still do.

Surrounded and cornered within the deathly gates of the academy, by a Western knowledge complex that was also prevalent and predatory to students at other levels of the educational system, Jordan, in a 1969 speech to graduating eighth graders in Ocean Hill Brownsville, framed Black Studies as “Life Studies.”

Therefore, as you enter high school, and as you undertake different courses, I hope you will remember this truth: the truth of your absolute value as a human life. Use this truth as your rule in measuring the education offered to you. Let me urge you to examine every subject given to you for study, and every assignment demanded of you. Ask this question, again and again, and again:

How does this study,
how does this subject, relate to the
truth of my life?¹¹

She continued:

I hope you will insist that your studies shall become Life Studies: Black Studies. Urban Studies. Environmental Studies. The American evidence of contempt for our Afro-American lives can easily be seen when you realize that we who are Black, and we who live in urban centers of the country, and we who poison ourselves simply by breathing the air, and we who swallow soap and worms, and worse than that, when we drink a glass of water—we cannot come into any classroom and learn what we need to know. Where are the central, required courses that will teach us our real heritage of heroes and heroines, rebellion, and loving accomplishment? Where are the central, required courses that will teach us how to design and govern cities so that the cities will function as great temples of life that welcome us inside[,] that welcomes our lives? Where are the central required courses that teach us how to destroy the enemy, urban situation that threatens all life now dwelling inside our city walls?¹²

The curriculum was composed of a reading of history that was a record not of human life but of power and war, “of the crimes of dollar blood,” of “battles and death and slavery and arrogance and suffering.” Politics was not about “justice or goodness”; it was about the management of those power relations created through slavery, colonialism, and death.¹³ Jordan called for an approach to study that turned away from the use and abuse of politics and power, for a study enlivened by the “profoundly human wish” for freedom. She declared: “Let us have no more to do with such power. Instead, let us, take control. Let us take responsibility for the freedom and wellbeing of each other.”¹⁴ What we once knew and must now be able to explain and remain bold enough to assert is that Jordan’s words—such a declaration, such a demand, such a dream—were a “menace to university curriculum and standards.”¹⁵

What we also knew then was that we needed other institutional forms. We created Black Studies programs *and* we imagined a Black University based on but ultimately going beyond the intent of historically Black colleges and universities.¹⁶ We struggled within Black Student Unions *and* we built intellectual spaces designed for community beyond the gates. We studied for credit *and then* we studied for life. There was the Institute of the Black World and the New School for Afro-American Thought and Malcolm X Liberation College and Drum and Spear, and the many other

examples of Black Study as simultaneously invested in but much larger than what happened on the Yard.¹⁷ These formations raised key questions about race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism and imperialism, and power. Yet their living archives are barely recognized in some corners.¹⁸

These groups and institutions housed important discussions where consensus was not always easy. Some of us believed in the materiality of our conditions and strongly asserted that it be privileged. Others felt that marginalized identities within the category of “Black” placed pressure on race as the only relevant category of analysis. Still others felt that this had all gone too far, that we should be struggling within traditional intellectual spaces to achieve our goals. While there were those who made autonomy the bellwether of Black Studies, only achievable by departmental status, others were just fine with a kind of structural interdisciplinarity that assumed we could only survive if attached to the “traditional disciplines.” As we became more and more institutionalized, the work being done outside the gates became less accessible to students and faculty. Some of that work disappeared and was disappeared. So some of us chose to become policy experts rather than organizers (a dichotomy that perhaps need not be). Some chose to be celebrities and entrepreneurs rather than intellectuals committed to the people. Some chose to try to return Black Studies to the disciplines we left behind. Such compromises are the marks of a certain kind of failure of the political imagination. Yet these were also all disagreements that mirrored ideological streams that went beyond the university’s gates. They are still present in discussions of what Black Studies should be almost three generations later. We can no longer act as though the current iterations of these debates were the first time that they were raised.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the university still produces knowledge that grins and lies. We must rip off its mask. And this is why re-membling is important. Lest we allow the debates and discussions that animated the Black Studies tradition to get framed as diversity and inclusion, as antiracism, or as a liberal project for pluralist democracy.²⁰ As the university became more and more “neoliberal,” individual academics more entrepreneurial, and human life and possibility more vulnerable, the “legitimization and institutionalization” of Black Studies in the 1980s made sustaining the original radical communal impulse all the more difficult.²¹

So we sought alternative formations within the gates again. The 1980s were a moment when that need to “come together as students, Black students” was again necessary.²² As Molefi Kete Asante’s “alternative epis-

temology” of Afrocentricity created the first terminal degree program in African American Studies at Temple University, Black Studies’ momentum was buoyed by the youth-inspired hip hop movement, as well as Pan African political struggle emanating from southern Africa.²³ Young people came to the university with questions—and new demands for Black Studies. Demands for its continued growth and development. Demands for an Afrocentric-focused and radical discipline. Demands for the discipline’s autonomy. But such demands existed alongside those consistent attempts to fuse the discipline back into the domains of traditional disciplinary categories. So by the end of the nineties, when several more universities offered the PhD, with differing foci and interests under the broad umbrella of Black nationalist, radical, and liberal traditions, there was a noticeable difference. The ceding of “normative theoretical space” to interdisciplinary formats, both administratively and methodologically, had become the *de rigueur* format of producing Black Studies in the US academy. Through joint appointments and other mechanisms, we now fold ourselves into “traditional” disciplines that were never unmade and have not changed. Our mere presence in these spaces allows them to claim that they have. The disciplines get to claim Black Studies by our proxy and by our unwillingness to reject them. This is not just an institutional or organizational concern. As what Greg Carr calls the “African study of phenomena and experience” was reduced to “the study of Black stuff,” the practices of Black Study receded from view.²⁴

But they did not disappear. In their work *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten imagine Black Study as both a strategy and form of critique, as well as perhaps a “location” for that strategy and critique. It was a place where study happened, where thinking on different terms happened. Harney and Moten’s conceptual work repositions what the academy casts as norms for study and what the disciplines imagine as the goal of intellectual work, asserting that such norms merely work to maintain systems of governance and control that Black Studies, in turn, works and has always worked to undermine. To choose Black Study is to choose to “be different”²⁵ in the face of bureaucratic discipline: “Some still stay, committed to black study in the university’s undercommon rooms. They study without an end, plan without a pause, rebel without a policy, conserve without a patrimony. They study in the university and the university forces them under.”²⁶ There is a relationship between debt and knowledge, between management and scholarship. If the managerial elite is a new function of university governance, it is also inscribed in

the history of intellectual traditions that enforce control and social order. Reckoning with the university, then, requires imagining an arrangement of knowledge that privileges a different order, a different set of interests. What passes for academic knowledge, the lies that Jordan evokes, will no longer suffice, and indeed have never sufficed. This tradition of study—Black Study—has its genesis in a long past.

And so here Black Study means that tradition of refusal of the knowledge of the world as it was given to us by those committed to colonial and racial order—and all the ways we still experience it, the many othering practices it generated. It is a refusal of the blessings of liberal humanism and its variants, the philosophy of life and living that is really only about the political same, a violent reanimation of the status quo, the Western conceptions of what has and should always be. It is in refusing that we created Black Study as the places—in the margins and contentedly so—that challenged everything the university handed down to us as the only possible reality. There is indeed an alternative and a tradition of study that rests upon the translation and recovery of different ways of knowing—this is our mission, and it is also that of Black Study. For Black peoples, forced into these spaces, have always had to make it so. For everything that the university represents has caused us to want and be different.

Occasioned by an academic moment when it seems something about that refusal has been lost, missing, and adrift, *Of Black Study* tries to add more to what we know about those who knew and worked for a conception of Black intellectual life that could not be folded into the worst of America's tradition of incorporating Black history into its own national myth; those who worked for a philosophy of liberation that could not be made into a Black version of the Enlightenment; those who realized also that Black liberation was inconceivable without revolution. While there is a great deal of attention paid to politics and ideology—categories that become reified as necessary and universal to all forms of reality—this book focuses on figures for whom the intellectual domain itself had to be undone in order to know something about the world around us. Their work was not as simple or as easy as a mere “revision” of white studies, as Jordan gestured toward. Black Studies “was a critique of Western Civilization” altogether.²⁷ And just as much, an imagining of an otherwise.

* * *

Of Black Study is an exploration of the ways that W.E.B. Du Bois, Sylvia Wynter, Jacob Carruthers, and Cedric Robinson arrived at that critique of

Western knowledge. In their unique ways, they constituted and extended a tradition of intellectual work—of Black Study—that went beyond the imperative to produce knowledge out of the framings and categorical logic of Western epistemologies. In their pursuit of a conceptual and epistemological freedom, they exposed the ways in which the knowledge foundations embraced in the university reflected the racial and colonial logic of modernity, and in doing so, these thinkers posited not “alternative modernities” but “alternatives *to* modernity.”²⁸ In the writings of these intellectuals, the academic disciplines come under severe scrutiny. Not only did they recover the roots of these academic formations, but their work also framed their claims of and for scientific legitimacy as similarly vexed, beholden in fact to a conceptual world that could only reveal their objects of analysis within certain codes and orders of arrangement. In other words, knowledge of the world was filtered through disciplines, which were themselves filtered through a particular way of conceiving reality. One could not simply apply them to Black experiences without care. Or without acknowledging how Black life was connected to the very contexts through which disciplines emerged. As similar critiques evolved from others who nevertheless remained committed to knowledge within the gates, the clear lines of difference were Black Study’s declaration of different stakes for such an inquiry.²⁹

For Du Bois, there was a desire to reveal the inadequacy of the prevailing norms of scientific inquiry, both on their own terms as well as their ability to reveal the Truth of the Black experience. His work continued a process of thinking beyond discipline, beyond even interdisciplines, in order to access that Truth. In that conception, Du Bois would have heirs who would take this further. His example was foundational to how they regarded the world. And just as *Of Black Study* grapples with Du Bois’s legacy in ways that are different from those texts that seek to exalt him as the founding father of several disciplines, it connects his confrontation with those disciplines to a genealogy of Black thinkers who extended his example in the early days of Black Studies.

Sylvia Wynter’s approach to the ideas of Enlightenment and humanism is a critique that is becoming more necessary even as her work is becoming more widely read. This work reveals the fraught foundations of liberalism at a time when it is *still* being hailed as the answer to the problems of Western society. Her work reveals that this hegemonic assumption of liberal ontologies can be dangerous, locating much of her critique in the question of “the human.” Jacob Carruthers’s work is sited

in the broad tradition of cultural nationalism, but it was premised on both critique and reconstruction. Carruthers's Black Study helped locate an approach to culture that did not map Blackness back onto the categories that Wynter and others critiqued. His invocation of speech as foundational to African life introduced a complex conceptual system and methodology for thinking about reality that has not been considered together with many recent Black Studies interventions. Finally, Cedric Robinson's understanding of the political nature of Western societies—a sadly unheralded component of his work if recent attention is a guide—was necessary for his development of the concept of the Black Radical tradition and emerged in part as a refutation of disciplinary categorization. For Robinson, the meaning of order could be seen as antithetical to certain African systems of society, and the academic disciplines that support order were unwelcome tools for excavating Black radicalism.

To be of Black Study is to be against the ways in which Western knowledge has influenced how reality—particularly the reality that has applied to Black life—has been presented to us. The forms of these presentations take their blueprint from the disciplines of knowledge, formations that emerged from the requirements of Western civilization, read here as that intellectual tradition that inspired the modern world. Implicit in the disciplines are the ways in which they represent themselves as real and logical and thus applicable to domains that are larger than their originary conceptual frames. It is of course beyond their purview to see the ways in which they became real. That is to say, it is perhaps illogical for disciplines to realize how they originate in ways that would demonstrate their constructedness, and even their arbitrariness, when the very point of disciplinary histories is to argue for their necessity.³⁰ This lack of awareness has enabled some to easily characterize Black Studies as “inherently” interdisciplinary. It is supposed that we can only be because the “traditional” disciplines exist. And because they exist, surely they must have always existed.³¹ But at best, the interdisciplinary formats of early Black Studies were a temporary compromise. Those committed to theorizing Africana Studies knew that a real reckoning with Black knowledges would mean disciplinary suicide. As Mack Jones once put it, “We have not shown an inclination to question them (our white mentors) in their entirety, their total beings, nor have we demonstrated a willingness to question their knowledge in its totality.”³² We would have to leave what was for some our deeply troublesome academic homes. And had we really left, we would

never be able to return. As early as the mid-1970s, Cedric Robinson had realized as much. This statement is worth quoting at length:

For many scholars of Black Studies, it was apparent quite early that the discipline of Black Studies would have to break the bounds, the traditional organization, of academic learning, research and scholarship that had emerged in American and European thought by the late 19th century. One needed more tools, more intellectual groundings than were present in the singular discipline of that tradition. For some of these Black Studies scholars, the most readily accessible solution was to construct this new discipline along multidisciplinary or, further, interdisciplinary lines. Presumably this would allow the new discipline the necessary longitude it required while providing enough familiarity for those academicians (and academic structures) with whom its proponents would have to articulate. Black Studies programs simply incorporated men and women trained in the traditional fields of history, sociology, political science, anthropology, ad seriatim. This was both possible and probably appropriate during the earliest phase of the development of the field. *It was not, however, a definitive nor ultimately a satisfactory solution.*

Such a procedure could not address in powerful, authentic terms the social and historical ordering, the crucial sensibilities which were concomitants in ideological and sociological form to the persistence of African peoples beyond the advent of modern industrial systems of production and social organization. Too much depended upon the sensibilities, the conceptualizations, the categories of experience, and the perceptions of African peoples being similar to those of non-African (specially, European and Euro-American) peoples. African notions of time, space, explanation, and the order of things, that is rationalization, had to resemble enough what is made of them in Western experience in order to be submitted to treatment according to the peculiar organization of knowledge which Westerners now think of as universal. This was the epistemological thrust which accompanied the early development of Black Studies and which contributed some misdirection.³³

This misdirection lingers and lingers. So there is now a generation who repeats the canard of interdisciplinarity as a guiding principle of Black Studies. Their veil of ignorance has become a useful tool for compromising our historical struggle for autonomy in hiring, promotion, and

even teaching. One simply frames Black Studies as Black *content* studies, leaving unaddressed the question of what it is we have done and do that is in fact different, in a space created for the purposes of intellectual transformation and human liberation rather than mere representation and recognition within what already is. In this corruption of our work, one also manufactured by administrative fiat and neoliberal priorities, we increasingly encounter an intellectual situation in which questions of theory and methodology come from the home of an individual's joint appointment rather than from a Black Studies tradition.

To those who genuinely want to escape, Black Studies can be such a space. But there are theories and methodologies all our own, ways of entering into a Black Studies "disciplinary" territory all our own. They must be renewed, yes. But first they must be known. We already have relationships to the traditional disciplines. And it was not always a given that we would merely compromise and accept the university's offers of peace. A lot of times it was intellectual warfare that defined that relation. For a critical contingent of Black Studies thinkers, the traditional disciplines and their relationship to Black Studies mirrored the relationship of every other Western mechanism of control and management in their relationship to Black life. Like the maroons, there would be a place in Black Studies waiting for those ready and willing to make the necessary break. So it is here where we might continue to think and utilize perceptions of African time, space, and explanation, à la Robinson, to eventually think beyond and break from even the category of "discipline." To think *otherwise*.

Of Black Study is concerned with this concept of "otherwise," to follow the thinking of writers like Ashon Crawley. In his beautiful analysis of the forms of Black pentecostal aesthetics that have been influential to Black self-actualization, Crawley makes the claim that Western modes of knowing could not reveal them for what they really were. Attached to Crawley's argument that Western theology and philosophy were constructed on aversion, on the propensity to *not see* Blackness in its fullness, is the idea of Black Study: "a mode of approaching objects, a form of intellectual practice, that resists the stilling and stasis of abstraction through language, and through quantifying ... concerned with the world, with the destruction of inequity and the imagining and material realizing of otherwise worlds, otherwise possibilities."³⁴ In thinking otherwise, we remove the conceptual and disciplinary logics supporting and reifying race, gender, otherness, and the related political projects that ensue from

them, while allowing other ways of being to animate how we know the world. Du Bois, Wynter, Carruthers, and Robinson write and theorize about this tradition of Black livingness, while simultaneously participating in the same political and ideological struggles that grounded them, creating a rich form of inquiry that possesses an urgency, an authenticity, a grounding that affirms that there is in fact a *beyond*—that there is more to Black thought than mere critique.

This book also imagines that *beyond*, that desire to frame a world and an African sense of being that exists in that world that is different from the worlds and the image of “the African” constituted by the modern. These, too, were part of explicit acts of resistance, struggles that continued into the twentieth century, where they were picked up by the intellectuals treated in this text. In their conceptions of liberation, the thinkers explored here, however, center ways of being and existing and of making worlds differently as the meaning and nature of freedom. It is Du Bois’s declaration that to the formerly enslaved freedom was God, the human rhythms of a general strike found in something more than just the American economic order; it is Wynter’s excavation of Black ritual and “jazz-life” as foundational to oppositions to New World economic arrangements; it is Carruthers’s ability to see in both Black intellectual traditions and Black struggles in revolutionary Haiti, the continuity of an ancient African tradition of “Deep Thought” concerned with the nature of the moral-spiritual universe; and it is Robinson’s Black Radical tradition as a way of accessing the meaning of how to live against Western notions of “the political.” These were their terms for “otherwise.” While there are differences in their projects, the question of how peoples of African descent live and might live is at the core of their Black Study.

Life Studies as Black Study.

Black Study as the beautiful ways in which Africans have always made meaning out of “this battlefield called life, called life, called life, called life.”³⁵

Black Study as the beautiful ways we do, feel, theorize, write, and teach our Lives.

Black Study as the beautiful ways that we have always recognized that in an academic setting where we are surrounded by ideas and practices that steal life, we will continue to live, and we will continue to choose to “believe in life.”³⁶