

"LIFE STUDIES," 1966-1976

---

JUNE JORDAN



Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev, Editors

SERIES 7, NUMBER 3, FALL 2017

## INTRODUCTION

THE MATERIALS WE have collected in these pages testify to June Jordan's efforts as a teacher and activist to proliferate what she called "Life Studies." We gathered our selections over the course of two visits to Jordan's vast collection of papers at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, part of the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. We set out to explore materials related to her involvement in the great pedagogical transformation of the 1960s and 1970s that swept through the City University of New York (CUNY)—the largest public urban university in the country, and our current institutional base as teachers and graduate students. The swirling energies of these decades had already begun to animate us while working on a collaborative 2013 *Lost & Found* project centering on Adrienne Rich, who had taught alongside Jordan at the City College of New York.

Moved by our own commitments to the possibility of a free university, fair housing, and transformative poetry, as well as learning from our research with other *Lost & Found* collaborators into the archives of Jordan's fellow City College teachers Toni Cade Bambara and Audre Lorde, we recognized that to study Jordan's life as an educator also meant to look beyond the college classroom. Thus, we have drawn a wide arc of Jordan's range of activities over a ten-year period, from 1966 to 1976, placing one of her earliest formal writings as an advocate for fair housing alongside speeches to librarians, educators, students, school administrators and poets. We place these alongside documentation of Black and Puerto Rican student life at City College, where Jordan supported student activists as they advocated for Open Admissions and course offerings relevant to their lives. In this assembly of materials, we trace her movement from a more deterministic outlook, as reflected in the earlier work on housing, to her realization while working with children, that poetry

can provide a route to a radical reconfiguration of consciousness as she advocates for practices of description, research, and imagination that make "Life Studies" possible.

Early in the 1960s, Jordan initiated a weekly pilgrimage to the Donnell Library in midtown Manhattan, where she immersed herself in learning about architecture, "hooked on that way of looking at things."<sup>1</sup> A meeting with Buckminster Fuller and deep engagement with his writings propelled her to bring this lens to a racially polarized American landscape, especially as she collaborated with Fuller on a plan to redesign Harlem, which was published in *Esquire* in April 1965. She undertook this work simultaneously with her other commitments; raising her young son in an interracial marriage while living in public housing in Queens, writing poetry in the hours after her husband and son had gone to bed. By day she traversed Harlem to research and work as a freelance journalist—meeting significant cultural figures including Louis Lomax, Malcolm X, reporters with *Amsterdam News*, and members of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), a pivotal civil rights organization.

In 1966, as debates mounted over the continued racial-economic segregation of New York City's public schools and neighborhoods, Jordan joined Mobilization for Youth, a community-action program, as a central analyst and ghostwriter. Her reports focused on the structural and quotidian aspects of multi-ethnic life inside housing projects and perpetually underdeveloped neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, as well as possibilities for improving their social conditions. Looking at these policy papers alongside the teaching materials that Jordan would generate just a year later, we can see that her environmental analyses turn into pedagogical insights. Reports including "The Determining Slum" depict how landlords and city officials intentionally create squalid and cramped living quarters to disempower generations of European immigrant, Black, and

<sup>1</sup> June Jordan, "One Way of Beginning This Book," *Civil Wars*, (Beacon, 1981), p. xvi.

Puerto Rican residents. In this context, Jordan describes how after the cramped home becomes unbearable for the student, the street can expand the field where learning and resistance are cultivated: "Liberation from crowded living quarters usually implies the street. The street functions as cradle, school, and the opportunity for an 'extended kinship system' which weakens the sense of family and also weakens any compulsion to improve the family's status."

The polemical essay's conclusions about the inevitable stasis of the poor measures Jordan's own doubts on the collective capacity for people to improve their lives, lacking reference to the historical grassroots organizing, rent strikes, and other housing actions undertaken by immigrants—primarily women—that she portrays with greater nuance in her other Mobilization for Youth writing on more contemporary situations. In the years that followed, as Jordan embarked on a teaching career that would carry through the next few decades, she began to articulate a resistance to such deterministic conclusions in her poetry and in the many essays and speeches where she invoked her work teaching poetry to children. While never shying away from an accurate description of the living conditions that constrain people's lives, she points to student writers, whose language generates power and leads to action, countering the notion that some people "are unable to do anything that will change their lives."

Progressive educator Herb Kohl recruited Jordan to the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, a writers-in-the-schools initiative run through Columbia University, after reading her profile in *The Urban Review* of four young people in New York City—two high school graduates, and two young men who had dropped out of high school to pursue their ambitions, one as a poet and the other as a founder of the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican activist organization with origins in Chicago. Beginning in autumn 1967, through their Teachers & Writers-sponsored program "The Voice of the Children," Jordan and

her white collaborator Terri Bush gathered over a dozen Black and Puerto Rican teenagers each weekend in East Harlem, and then in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, to read and write poems and newsletters, listen to music, and take field trips. A note to "Visitors and Adult Friends of the Children" dated 1969-1970, shows the deep respect for children's autonomy that Jordan and Bush cultivated, as the memo directs adults to give them space as they work and refrain from passing judgment on their writing.

When she began teaching children, Jordan was recently divorced and, as the primary caretaker for her son, actively reading and cultivating theories of child development. In "Children and the Hungering For," a speech she delivered at a poetry festival in 1969, she ties these theories to poetry writing, linking the composition of poetry and self. In this speech and in "Our Eyes Have Grown," delivered in 1970 to school librarians at Donnell Library, she defines poetry as an emphatically first-person, communication-oriented mode of writing. Poetry is "how we name what happens to us;" it plays a vital role in "our affirmation of the individual, individual orientation." For Jordan, such affirmation does not promote individualism or self-commodification; but initiates a "multiplication of relationships that start from me and mine and I."

These speeches are standout examples of how Jordan repeatedly mobilized her experience with "The Voice of the Children" to urge educators, administrators, poetry lovers, and young people themselves to use poetry in rethinking how and where learning happens. Jordan and Bush had designed their Saturday workshops with a certain looseness, as Jordan explains in "Children and the Hungering For," in "a deliberate attempt to emphasize the separation between Saturdays and school, which is a place where children 'fail.'" When Jordan guides her poetry festival audience to imagine "how Saturdays could take place in the classroom," she encourages teachers to set up browsing situations to encourage students' self-direction, and to

work collaboratively with students in generating readings and course guidelines. She also presents poetry as a synthetic and reflective mode of analysis that can be used no matter what children are learning: "I wish all periods of study included poetry as the personal summary and evaluation of the hour that has passed," she writes.

Because of the potential power first-person writing holds, Jordan saw her advocacy for young poets as a counterforce to public schools' denigration of their lives—especially the lives of the Black and Puerto Rican students she taught in her weekend workshops—and then at City College, where she had joined the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) and English departments in the late 1960s. While the development of Black Studies is often associated with movements in and around colleges and universities, Jordan grounds it in youth literacies and K-12 community control. She emphatically declares this vision in a 1970 graduation speech-poem delivered to middle school students at I.S. 55 in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn—excerpts of which we publish here for the first time. At the site of a fierce struggle for Black community control that would come to define the racial divisions in education, Jordan urged these young students to remember "the truth of your absolute value as a human life," and to "insist that your studies shall become Life Studies: Black Studies. Urban Studies. Environmental Studies." When Jordan insists that Black Studies are a part of "Life Studies," her words resonate in this immediate context. "For, what is the purpose of a school," she asks students and their families, "If it will not prepare you to live your own life of your own choosing in the community of your choice?"

Just as Jordan intervened in public arenas on Black community control of education in which poetics and youth literacies were central components, she also helped form new directions in Black Studies and Women's Studies through her teaching and activism at City College from 1967 to 1978. Alongside such teachers as Aijaz

Ahmad, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, David Henderson, Audre Lorde, Raymond Patterson, Adrienne Rich, and Mina Shaughnessy, Jordan brought to the bustling campus milieu an understanding of social aid programs and urban unrest in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Lower East Side. This period of dramatic change was punctuated by the April 1969 City College strike, in which Black and Puerto Rican students occupied several campus buildings and created "Harlem University" to demand changes in admissions, curricula, and teacher hiring and training. In solidarity with their classmates, a group of white students also occupied a building. Of this time, Jordan writes, "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."<sup>2</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the strike, Jordan wrote an important essay that we publish here for the first time— "The City and The City College: An off-campus, off-camera perspective." This text offers a unique entry into themes that would later appear in her landmark work "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person." Published in the October 1969 issue of *Evergreen Review*, this first major document on Black Studies by a Black woman educator at the time circulated lessons from the City College rebellion to a broad counter-cultural audience. Read alongside the work of her colleagues, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde and others, the essays highlight how these Black feminist teachers shaped explosive institutional and interpersonal changes at the same time as the Black Power movement erupted across campuses.

The City College strike demands emerged from the mission and

---

2 June Jordan, "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," *Civil Wars*, (Simon and Schuster, 1995), 46.

practices of the basic writing program for the students Jordan taught. She directly addresses their demands for the creation of a school of Third World Studies, and for incoming students to proportionally reflect the city's Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian high school student population. While Jordan proposes study alliances between poor people of all colors, this demand for Black Studies by and for Black people (and by extension, Puerto Rican and Third World Studies) builds upon the community control paradigm that had heightened over the last several years in New York City. As Jordan wrote, "Beyond Black or White, there is the search for Life Studies, and therefore, there is this question Universities will have to answer, through radical change, or else perish: How do you provide for the Study of Human Life?"<sup>3</sup>

The struggle to maintain Open Admissions and establish a form of community control that could account for Jordan's sense of "Life Studies" intensified and continued. From 1970 onwards, reactionary CUNY faculty and mainstream media constructed a racist elitist discourse on "The Death of the University"—in which Open Admissions allegedly only benefited poor Black and Puerto Rican students, and thus CUNY's standards were in a downfall—which detracted attention away from the deep retrenchment of fewer resources for larger classes. As Jordan understood from her housing advocacy days, the long-practiced urban policy of maintaining overcrowded and under-resourced slums in the Bronx, Harlem, Lower East Side, and other impoverished areas became a model for forcibly overcrowding and underfunding CUNY after Open Admissions.

On a daily interpersonal level, the impact of these policies exhausted teachers, students, and staff at City College, as they became

---

3 June Jordan, "Black Commentary on White Discussion of Black Studies" (reply to Genovese), June Jordan Papers, Series XI; Box 75; Folder 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

nationally recognized as a site of transformative admissions and writing pedagogies. Fellow SEEK educator Adrienne Rich laments of this disorienting time “an overcrowded campus where in winter there is often no place to sit between classes... with the incessant pressure of time and money driving at [students] to rush, to get through, to amass the needed credits somehow, to drop out, to stay on with gritted teeth.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, these colleagues tenderly looked after each other and their own creative projects, as revealed in a November 1973 letter from Jordan to Audre Lorde.<sup>5</sup>

I have to report that I am spending these days... in the cleaning of my house, and myself, I guess; trying to get ready for winter—a rotten winter like the one last year, when I ran out of everything—food, health—but this time I figure I’d better get the novel written—hell or high water, and then move on. So I am mostly calm, during the day. And gesturing closer and closer to my real work. Maybe god has intervened—to stop all this ‘teaching’ stuff and ‘travelling’ stuff so I can/must concentrate on the dream unwritten still, and still a longing for the people of my heart. You keep well, please, and keep in touch, and keep the poem alive.

After a few years of teaching stints at Connecticut College, Sarah Lawrence College, and Yale University, Jordan returned to City College in 1975. University austerity measures had become a national issue by the end of the war in Vietnam and the imposition of domestic structural readjustment that, in New York City, took on the form

<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions (1972),” *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, (Norton 1978), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from June Jordan to Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde Papers; Spelman College Archives.

of a fiscal crisis demanding an end to free higher education via the imposition of tuition for all CUNY students.

In a May 5, 1976 statement at a CUNY Board of Education public hearing on tuition, Jordan registered outrage as a Black woman faculty member on behalf of the City College English Department. Applying her arguments from a decade earlier in “Brief History of the Lower East Side” and “The Determining Slum,” she lauds CUNY’s historic access to poor European immigrant students, but notes that once Black and Puerto Rican students began to enter the university in larger numbers, free education was suddenly imperiled. Jordan frames the imposition of tuition in the terms of survival, in which, implicitly, “Life Studies” is endangered. She warns that ending free tuition and, therefore, truly Open Admissions, would bear grave consequences for the city.

The Fall 1976 imposition of tuition occurred with massive layoffs of many of the faculty who had helped usher in Open Admissions. Jordan herself would be laid off from City College for one semester, and then return for a final year to mentor and teach poetry to future luminous writers, including Sekou Sundiata. These aggressive economic policies would pave the way for a significant reversal of 1960s-1970s social movements’ aspirations, as CUNY and New York City suffered economic shock therapy that would soon bend the nation’s cities and colleges towards privatization and sharpened inequalities. That Jordan struggled uphill to enact lasting changes in New York, and in its City University, against the pressures of racism, sexism, and elitism—during a time of intensified economic austerity that mirrors our own—indicates that her legacy is still unfinished.

The documents in this collection, centering on housing justice, creative youth literacies, and college access and curriculum demands as tributaries for “Life Studies,” provide a means to navigate the local, national, and international contexts in which Jordan found herself

called to action. The recent revival of research and conferences on her legacy, along with the circulation of her poetry for #BlackLivesMatter and International Women's Strike events, marks a turning point in which her voluminous archive can help us clarify and intervene in our own contexts now. From Jordan's library archives into these pages you hold—a portable vision for "Life Studies"—we invite readers to reconstruct these practices of shared dignity, creative expressions, and justice.

—Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev

#### A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

Jordan's manuscript pages were typescript with occasional handwritten notes in pen on the margins, often with directives as to where things should be inserted and in what sequence. Here is an example:

But is <sup>it</sup> ~~is~~ your <sup>only</sup> ~~only~~ life, that we come together, this morning, to honor and to celebrate. ~~And~~ <sup>At</sup> any time we ~~can~~ come together, any time we ~~can~~ come together to celebrate the lives of children, the precious life of Black children, I think to myself: This is how we should start: This is how we should begin to build another way, another kind of ~~our~~ humankind, a really new nation. We have to begin by cherishing our children. ~~What do you think?~~ <sup>What do you think?</sup> ~~New York~~ <sup>New York</sup> are bound for what they call high school. Many of us despair when we think about high school. We wonder: in what sense is it higher than any other level of education? In what way does it elevate

We have followed her directives to the best of our abilities in transcribing these texts.

#### EXCERPT FROM BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE [JUNE, 1966]

[...]

#### TRANSITION TO THE GHETTO: 1830-1900

After 1830, the laissez-faire tradition of New York functioned as an open passport for millions of European refugees. The new immigrants arrived by hoards, penniless and hopeful. They came to America as the alternative to starvation and/or persecution. There were refugees from famine; there were peasants abruptly dispossessed of land and thus, of a dependable way of life; there were victims of religious or political harassment and discrimination. These people: Irish, Germans, Chinese, German Jews, Russian Jews, Poles and Italians came by the hundreds of thousands to New York. Although the lasting physical patterns—street and building reflections of poverty—were firmly emerging, the Lower East Side continued to be a turnstile community till approximately 1915; passage to America or departure from the Lower East Side was movement by ethnic group. Successive immigrant groups expected to leave within one or two decades of their arrival; the majority fulfilled this hope. For all of the massively arriving immigrants, "New York" was the Lower East Side.

#### HOUSING PROBLEMS OF THE GHETTO: SLUM SOLUTION

Close to the point of arrival and to employment opportunities for unskilled, low-wage workers, the Lower East Side was the natural haven for those recently landed. In fact, no alternatives of employment or means of transportation to other areas of employment were available. The immigrants formed a captive population immobilized by poverty almost at dockside. Housing accommodations, albeit wretched, were quickly provided and former mansions became houses of many

we tried to obliterate the usual distinctions between creative writing, or art, and life. We were trying to prove, by having it happen, that poetry is as natural as neighborhood friends and as natural as dancing the Funky Four Corners.

Within a few months, the original group increased in size and in its commitment. The children elected to form a magazine called *The Voice of the Children*.

Now they were publishing, once a week. The secondsight of their work, changed into type, transmuted from a private to a more public (legible) statement, tremendously excited the kids. In addition, when they were able to read their writings, in typescript, they became critical, in new ways, and their craft rapidly advanced. As, and only if, requested by the children, their published work changed with respect to spelling. No inflections were added, nor any idiomatic usage "corrected." From the habitual and building fluency of their work, the children, spontaneously, became concerned about punctuation, stanzas, paragraphs, and form, generally. Questions about these technicalities were pursued by the children because they wanted to make sure that what they said could not be mistaken, by anybody.

Today, the audience that admires the children's work has widened even as the distinction and clarifying moment of their voices steadily deepens. The very experience of successful communication has assisted the children in their constructive overleaping of poverty-limitations. And their valuable awareness of special identity has been strengthened.

Because The Voice of the Children's Workshop springs from a collaboration between a public school teacher of English, and myself, we have been concerned to imagine, at least, how Saturdays could take place in the classroom. [...]

OCEAN HILL BROWNSVILLE,  
I.S. 55 GRADUATION SPEECH [1970]

This is a poem for all the children.

Two days ago I went visiting over to the Countee Cullen School in Harlem: P.S. 194. We were having a creative writing workshop there, and one of the little girls took longer than anyone else to put something down on paper. But, finally, she wrote something that she let me read. She had written this simple sentence:

"I hope that I will live to be twelve."

At first, her words turned my heart around with sorrow, for we know how terrifying it is to be alive, and to want to be alive, and to be Black, here, in America. But then the bravery of her words started to ring clear. Her words speak to the amazing courage of our people, and to the miraculous continuing of our life, as a people. We go on. And we go on. We go on from 1967, in Newark, New Jersey, when an unarmed, Black boy lay on the street, in sneakers face down, and dead from a policeman's bullet—We go on to the recent victory of Kenneth Gibson, a Black man who is now the Mayor-Elect of that city. We go on. And we will go on from here. And I hope that all of you beautiful students here, this morning, about to graduate from I.S. 55, will always hold the same brave desire as your first desire for yourselves: The desire to go on, to keep on, to move ahead, to move on up.

Last night, I was trying to think how I could share what I deeply believe with you. And the single belief I beg you to share with me is this one: That your life is the most important fact, and, also, the most important and valuable promise, on earth. Period. It is a once-only life that you have. And it is a vulnerable life that you have, subject to increasing dangers that too few of us struggle against, or even understand.



But it is this, your once-only life, that we come together, this morning, to honor and to celebrate.

Any time we come together, any time we can come together to celebrate the lives of children, the precious life of Black children, I think to myself: This is how we should start: This is how we should begin to build another way, another kind of humankind, a really new nation. We have to begin by cherishing our children.

You are bound for what they call high school. Many of us despair when we think about high school. We wonder in what sense is it higher than any other level of education? In what way does it elevate the lives of our Black children? Many of us worry about the fact that high school is where a tragic majority of Black and Puerto Rican children drop out of sight: they leave school: because what happens to them in the classroom annihilates their rightful pride, and meets their earnest, real needs with nothing more than irrelevant and contemptuous instruction.

But education must be about the truth, or we should forget about it. And I believe that the most important and the most valuable truth on earth is that we are alive, we are the living. That is to say, that we are the truth. 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?

You may find, too often, that the answer is: either "not enough" or "not at all." If the study and if the subjects do not positively and usefully relate to the truth of your life, then you will have to watch for the differences between knowing and believing. You will have to

know a great, great deal more than you, or anyone else in his or her right mind, can or should respect or believe. But, beyond knowing much more than you believe or respect, you can, and 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? [...]

For instance, most American history to date is not a history of justice, of equity and virtue; most American history is a running-wild account of winners and losers, of the crimes of dollar blood, of conquest and battles and death and slavery and arrogance and suffering.

But if you will think about it, you will see that winning battles and conquering people and enslaving human life very often have nothing whatever to do with justice or goodness. These have to do, too often, with the mere exercise of power. These things have to do, too often, with the mere survival of the powerful—at the expense of equally valuable, and important people and children who perish, because we have been less powerful.

So I say to you, let us have done with power. Let us stop

supporting the old, traditional power. Let us turn away from politics, generally. Let us turn our backs on politics and power as they have been traditionally used and abused. In the place of the old power, let us reconsider that profoundly human wish, that profound firing motivation that comes from the soul. Let us resurrect the creative power of freedom. Let us work to be free from the control of strangers to our life. Let us make our lives free from the control of those who kill our children. We must have our own lives under our own control.

For we have seen what the old, traditional power means. Of all the people in the world, Black Americans, Afro-Americans, know the meaning of power: The traditional meaning of power is inhuman. It is, at all times, intrinsically opposed at least to some human life—whether it is opposed to human life in Birmingham, or in Ocean Hill, or in Harlem, or in Detroit, or in Watts, or in Memphis, or in Augusta, or in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Cambodia, or in Vietnam.

—It—the old, abusive American Power is opposed to human life. 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.

I am calling for our own people power.

Garbage burned in the street, a few days ago, here in Ocean Hill, because a garbage truck is a political machine. We must make ourselves into a community machine that will eliminate and throw out their political machinery.

What we have to do, right now, is to create community machines that will collect our garbage, control our schools, and patrol our streets for our safety and not our persecution. We must no longer wait for somebody to remember us and then, maybe, to send a garbage truck to pick up the garbage. We must no longer wait for somebody to maybe understand our history and then to maybe teach our children the truth. We must no longer simply tremble when we hear the gunfire of police, or state troopers, or the National Guard. We must

take control. We must protect our once-only lives, we have to take apart and then replace the whole political life that has proven deadly to our own lives. We have to build a Living structure of our own true human community.

In the deepest sense, community is not political. A community is a social environment (making plain one common purpose: the happy advancement of all who live within the community.) So we are talking about parents and children, uncles and aunts, grandmothers, teachers and students who can come together as a deliberate, social community of people who shall be safe, and who shall grow strong and who shall prosper because they do truly belong to this same community. Look to the community of Fayette, Mississippi. Look to the community of Newark, New Jersey, where the people have put forward a good man, and a Black man, as mayor at least. And to you, young graduates, I say the same: Please. Look ahead. Don't drop out of high school. Change the high school. Make the high school your own life-preserving community. It's your high school: people force you to sit there at least until you are 16 years old, at least. All right. Turn it around. Since you are compelled to attend high school, then compel that school to serve your life, serve to enable and to ennoble your life so that you can defend it, and so that you will have a life you can follow and share, proudly. Go through high school. Don't turn off. Take it over: Don't drop out. Change it. Let us insist that Life Studies, that Black Studies, that Urban Studies become the central parts of the curriculum, Right now.

For, what is the purpose of a school if it will not prepare you to live your own life of your own choosing in the community of your choice?

Let us raise up people power versus political power.

Let us build schools into our community machine that will eliminate the old political machines—those old political machines that ignore communities of people, or else burn down villages of

people, or else starve families of people, or else murder the children of our communities.

It is right that we meet here, in a holy place of prayer to honor our children. We want you to know that we recognize your lives as holy lives. We consecrate our own lives to your survival and to your perpetual freedom. We pledge that we will work and pray and talk and plan together for the support of your hopes that you will live to be fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, sixty-five, and ninety-years-old:

Tell the whiplash helmets GO  
and take away  
that cream and orange Chevrolet  
stripped to inside steel and parked  
forever on one wheel

Set the wild dogs chewing up  
that pitiful capitulation  
plastic flower plastic draperies  
to dust the dirt

Break the clothesline  
Topple down the clotheslinepole

O My Lives Among the Wounded Buildings  
should be dressed in trees and grass

I salute you, my brothers and my sisters: Be strong,  
Be beautiful, and BE FREE!

We salute you, the sons and the daughters of our hearts and our pride.  
Congratulations.

## OUR EYES HAVE GROWN [1970]

In the beginning was the word and the word was with  
God and the Word was God.

I used to believe that. I used to believe that,  
completely. It used to be true.

You began to know the world, through words. The word  
was the way into time and across the waters of the  
earth;

the word was the way among peoples: introducing  
people,  
separating them, marrying their lives, burdening their  
birth. Even at the graveside, words were spoken first,  
and the dirt was thrown.

But now our eyes have grown. Our children see what no  
one can explain. Our eyes stare witness to a reckless  
camera running around a universe of visible,  
increasing

mystery. Our eyes have grown.

White people see Black people

Hawks see Doves

Poor people see President Nixon

Fat people see hunger

Hungry people see food

Everybody sees Chicago

Soldiers see students

Students see death

Our eyes have grown

America owns more cameras, reaching further and  
more

privately, than any other nation. American eyes roam  
everywhere.

And even as our eyes stretch, wretched from confusion  
and fears, American hatred, American misery,

American  
peril and despair have grown and grown into a  
breathing  
agony. We are among the agonizing and the stupefied.

We  
are staggering from spectacle.  
The spectacle is life.  
The living are those who watch life, sitting down.  
We are those who watch.

We have been forced inside a mirror, a mirror we cannot control  
or change. Only our eyes have grown. More and more, for us,  
reality begins on film. I am concerned about the ending. It is not  
impossible that human life will terminate on television, so to speak.  
At six o'clock, *The Last Spectacular* will captivate its biggest audience.  
Is anyone prepared to sponsor that? At this moment when our  
overgrown eyes coincide with the explosion of social coherency, and  
the disintegration of moral agreement, let me plead for librarians, for  
books, for sentences, for words.

Schools of every description and at every level ask for "visual aids"  
*Visual aids.*

We need help. Visual aids will not help us, a people incommunicado  
with our eyes wide open.

In particular, the children who blink their way into our savage legacy,  
they do not need visual aids, they need help of another kind:

*What's that?*

*That's a massacre.*

*What's a massacre?*

*Look at the picture.*

*I seen the picture. What's a massacre.*

*How does a massacre feel. Is air pollution a massacre.*

*Is massacre all right for a while. Is a massacre okay,  
under some circumstances. What does the picture mean?*

Or, here is another possibility:

When I grow up, I want to be a photograph of somebody famous.

Or else: When I grow up I don't want to develop into a photograph.

Our words must grow. If we abandon language, we will surely  
abandon the possible meanings of the word *humane*.

Our words must grow: Brother, family, home: Either  
these words will rapidly enlarge to include the whole world, or we  
will not survive.

The library has to compete with the movies.

Words will have to win that competition.

Or, at least, words will have to win their way right up onto the screen,  
under the imagery of our shown and spreading chaos.

Libraries, books, sentences, words will have to supply the subtitles  
that yield relief, the captions that promise understanding, regardless  
what it is we see, *per force*.

Let me make a few suggestions, about your competition.

Perhaps librarians could collaborate with teachers or, on an older  
level, with community leaders toward the establishing of a special  
section reserved for student and community writings. These writings,  
organized on a monthly basis, would be available to everyone  
interested. Students could be encouraged, if not required, to spend  
time studying what their immediate contemporaries, what their  
teachers, what their parents, and local leaders have written, what these

familiar, but deeply unknown associates think and want, and why. With very young children, the eliciting of material could be attempted on this basis: Ask him to write

whatever

he wants everybody to know. Or ask her to write whatever she thinks is important, although nobody seems to care.

From all students, book reviews, research papers, diaries, poems, television and movie reviews could be solicited, for the library. Of course, editorials should be solicited from everybody, about everything, all the time.

In addition to creating a valuable community resource for cooperation and the improvement of local welfare,

and in addition to creating nonacademic, human motivations to express oneself honestly and clearly, there would probably be an enormous rise in spontaneous library browsing. Besides this, librarians could come to enjoy much greater certainty about the interests and the comprehending levels of the students they hope to serve. It seems obvious that the best way to bring people into the library is to bring them in: Bring them in as writers, as thinkers, as readers.

I think of the library as a sanctuary from the spectacle, from the alienation, from the unnamed, and the seeming unnameable. A library is where you keep records of involvement, the glorious and ugly tangling of the human spirit with what we meet, what we see. A library is where you keep records of human experience humanly defined: That means humanly evaluated and

that

means life worded into ideas living people can use.

People belong in such a sanctuary. Bring them in.

Bring the children into the library as writers; that will help them to think, and that will lead them to read. That will help you to know

these younger people, and that will help you to present other writers to them, other thinkers who occupy that sanctuary.

*Second*, let me suggest that you offer poetry to students. Poetry and more poetry. One reason why students, from grammar school through the university, are writing poetry now is the same reason why they want to read it. They have to read poetry. They have to write poetry. Poetry is the most personal language of experience.

It is how we name what happens to us. It is how we name ourselves. It is how we name our dreams so that others will join in our dreaming. It is how we name what terrified, and how we exorcise that terror. It is attitude and response. It is consistently individual.

It is our affirmation of the individual, individual orientation. It is the namesaying of *me* and *mine* and I, and it is the multiplication of relationships that start from me and mine and I, and it is the metaphor that is the marrow, particular sensation of an only life trying to reach out, trying to touch, trying to understand whoever and whatever exists beyond the realm of *me*, *mine*, and *I*.

Poetry and more poetry. Poetry is the ultimately personal grasping for relationship, for involvement.

It is the opposite of spectacle. The poet is antithetical to someone who sits down outside of his life, to watch. Poetry is the ultimately personal grasping for relationship. Please recommend poetry, please offer poetry to the poets. And believe me, we are all poets, whether we write poetry, or not.

*Third*, let me suggest that you offer students readings in drama.

Plays have a good word going for them: *plays*.

Plays present words and action, at once. It is like most of our social experience: words and actions, at once. Words predicting, influencing, altering, representing action. Words as action. Action as the consequence of words. Re-action as words. Words as the reaction

to what happens, what we see, what we hear. And these words, in drama, these words come from a human being, they travel to human beings, they return to human being. In drama, words are never dried ink:

In drama, words are what they are: Our human communication of our being human.

*Fourth*, let me suggest that you offer students whatever books seem urgently relevant to you—for yourself. I do think it is infinitely preferable to have a student declare that a book is “too hard,” than for any of us to presume he is “too young.”

Specifically, I mean, offer students from junior high school up books like *Why We Can't Wait*, by Martin Luther King, or *Culture and Commitment*, by Margaret Mead, or *The Politics of Experience*, by R.D. Laing, or *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, by R. Buckminster Fuller, or *The Peculiar Institution*, by Kenneth Stampp, or *Souls of Black Folk*, by W.E.B. DuBois. From junior high school up, offer these books to children. Let them turn them back, if they do. Give them *The Affluent Society* by Galbraith and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Give them *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky and give them *The Crime of Punishment*, by Karl Menninger.

Remember, the so-called children of our responsibility are witness to the six o'clock news. Childhood is no longer innocent; children are baffled to the point of drug-using desperation. We have already blundered into *1984* and *Brave New World*. Give them yourselves; what you worry about, what you believe; give them the books you are reading, and tell them why you are reading these books.

A last suggestion: please remember that our moral imagination is on trial. When I say “our” I mean the world's moral imagination is on trial. I think that means we have to develop our capacities to empathize, to recognize our own self in other people. That means

black and white and everybody American has to recognize Richard Wright's *Native Son* as black and white and everybody American, for example.

It means that we have to discover what we, in our most bizarre human variety, nevertheless share as menace and as loving possibility to each other, and to ourselves. Therefore, Steinbeck and Gorki belong alongside Eldridge Cleaver, and Jean-Paul Sartre belongs alongside LeRoi Jones, whether the school is “white” or “black.”

End of suggestions.

Once upon a time, when I was a college sophomore, I wrote an autobiography, an epic poem, as an English term paper. The poem was called *Aorta*. In *Aorta*, the girl panics at the spectacle: she rejects the bewilderment of seen reality; she tries to enter a voluntary constructive blindness. In blindness, she hopes to restore the functioning of mind and spirit. These lines occur midway in *Aorta*:

“There is arrogance in moving through a crowd with steady gaze  
and beggar's cup.

There is more arrogance in moving through a crowd without a  
beggar's cup.

The most arrogant act is that of moving through a crowd  
without a beggar's cup and deliberately choosing not to gaze  
beyond your mind.”

The young poet has discovered that mind unrelated to the spectacle will not suffice; it is merely arrogance. One page later, these lines occur:

“how will i know you? how will you know me?

by a flower in my hair?

by an odour from your sleeve?

by a scar across your neck?

by the way in which you walk?

what does it mean: i will know you  
by your faith, or by your love?"

In *Aorta*, I could only ask the questions. I had no hunch about the answers.

Then, many years later, 1964, I went to The World's Worst Fair, organized by Jesse Gray, in Harlem. Visitors to "The Fair" were invited to wander down East 117th St., between Madison and Fifth Avenues. One of the children, a boy barely more than bone, became my guide through the daylight shadows of his life. We talked and I asked him his name.

"Why do you want to know my name?"

Because this is your street. From any corner of it men and women diversify the same deformity. As a pattern it is not spectacular: a limp, a lump above an ear, a purulent complexion, a tremor or a shortened arm, a split-seamed pair of pants, a junky wavering on his way, burned skin, ringworm, a stuttering of speech and staggered speed. This is your street swept and washed and swept eleven times by noon this morning washed and swept but kept its stink of rats. This filthy smell steams from the rough scrubbed lane between the sidewalks.

"Why they clean the street so much? Ain nobody gone lay down on it."

One set of cellar steps leads steeply below street level to where three men perspire in the darkness as they hurry to cement a fence of bricks quickly piled. The problem, you see, is to hold the rats inside; make them die in there.

The boy repeats his question:

"Why do you want to know my name?"

Because of the rats. Because of the first floor windows shut by steel. Because of the stairways of urine that never collapse. Because of the

ceaseless erosion of wall and post and ceiling, floor and window sill. Because erosion is sadistic. Because no one has the guts, the mercy to bomb this block, to all at once destroy every structure undergoing criminal erosion.

"Why do you want to know my name?"

Because you say she is your mother sitting on the stoop, with artificial pearls around her neck.

They call you poor. They call you black. They call you Negro.

What is your name? I meant to ask if you are brimming, empty, probable or dying. But now I want to know, who are you? This is your street: You must be despised. Something about you must be dangerous. Police keep watching you. They see how raggedy you are. They see how small you are. Yet they keep watching you. Ten years old, but dangerous. None of the police is near enough to know you smell of rats.

"My name," he told me at last, "My name is Tyrone."

That afternoon, I learned the answer. How will I know you? I will know you by your name.

You will know me by my name.

Words are the names of history, minute by minute.

We must name the history to which we are responsible:

We must name ourselves, and we must name the others we must recognize as crucial to the history our lives imply.

We stand convicted by the language we employ. We live accessible to love according to the language we invent.

We will know each other by our names.

Our words must grow. Our eyes have grown. Our words must grow.