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The Other Side of Terror

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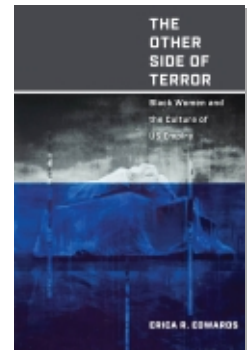
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Perfect Grammar

June Jordan and the Intelligence of Empire

The US government's war against the Black poor, the Black mothers, the Black ill, and the Black radicals after 1968 sounded its rallying cries with linguistic cunning. As the writer and organizer June Jordan wrote in 1972, "The Man has brought the war home, where it's always really been at: sometimes explosive, sometimes smoldering, but currently, as stark, inhuman, and deliberate as the 'perfect grammar' of Nixon's war cries raised, calm as a killer, against the weak, the wanting, and the ones who cannot fight back." To this she added a question: "How will we survive this new—this, to use a standard English term, 'escalated'—phase of white war against Black life?"¹ Jordan's work as a radical writer, activist, city planner, and teacher in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s consistently called attention to the relationships between the state violence leveled at Black people "at home" in US cities and towns and the US-led and/or US-funded invasions and occupations in the Middle East, Latin America, and South Africa. The way her work wrestled with the many arms of US imperialism's broad reach was to return to the elemental forms of language—verb tenses, possessive cases—that built the language of empire and to invent insurgent grammars of survival. From offering primers on the official state language that covered over and covered for the atrocious violence committed by a government that was desperate to recover its authority and to position itself as the world's exemplary democracy, to cataloguing the forms of speech that kept the militant, internationalist energies of Black Power and third-world feminism alive well into the 1980s, Jordan's cross-generic inquiry into the perfect grammars of intelligence and counterinsurgency offered Black text and Black speech patterns up for a radical reclaiming from empire's uses. If the imperial grammars of Blackness translated Black pain into the speech of empire, not just in words but also in gestures and postures

of affirmation and empowerment, Jordan's work joined the radical Black feminist project of inventing insurgent grammars.

Jordan was one of the Black feminist cultural workers who passed through the institutions that legitimized the long war on terror. Throughout the post-1968 period, Black feminist writers like Jordan shattered the terms—the very grammars—that articulated the unstable, coproductive relationship between the defiant culture of Black books and the incorporating imperatives of late- to post-Cold War US culture. In this chapter, I analyze the poetry, drama, and nonfiction that June Jordan wrote between 1979 and 1985 as interventions that are deeply attuned to the linguistic work of US public discourses of security and policing and, at the same time, attentive to the ways that Black grammars of resistance and subsistence slant those imperial grammars of empire. Jordan's work over these years articulated Black literary feminism as a code for urgent care, or rather insurgent care, in the era of late Cold War. From 1979 to 1985, Jordan's geolinguistic poetics theorized counterinsurgent intelligence—the intelligence of empire—as the very medium of state violence and offered itself up as a key—an essential tool, a strategy of interpretation, a strategy for practice—to insurgent safety. I refer to this key as Jordan's *postintelligence code*.

Jordan wrote about the perfect grammar of the domestic war against Black people and the wars against independence movements in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia in 1972. She was writing about a “new phase” of white war against Black life exemplified by the post-1968 escalation of surveillance, torture, incarceration, and murder leveled at Black activists and Black everyday people. In her militant Black Power-era writings, Jordan rejected assimilation as a way of surviving that new phase of war. In “White English / Black English: The Politics of Translation,” the same essay in which she wrote of the war come home, she identified the Black government worker as a figure who colludes with the violence of counterinsurgent warfare and, at the same time, has the capacity for insurgent translation:

By now, most Blackfolks—even the most stubbornly duped and desperately light-headed nigger behind his walnut, “anti-poverty” desk—has heard the Man talking that talk, and the necessary translation into Black—*on white terms*—has taken place. Yeah. The Man has made his

standard English speech, his second inaugural address, his budget statements, and ain' no body left who don't understand the meaning of them words falling out that mouth: In the *New York Times*, February 25, 1973, Dick Nixon has described the genocide perpetuated by America in Vietnam as “*one of the most unselfish missions ever undertaken by one nation in the defense of another.*”²

Throughout Jordan's writing, the tendency to identify and ridicule the precise words of liberal democracy's fallacies of protection often returned to the convention of “White English,” where the quotation marks (around, for example, “anti-poverty”) expose the clichés of official state language. Jordan exposes and redefines a number of terms, from “efficiency” and “competence,” when she is writing about the contemporary university's “deadly, neutral definition of these words,” to “foreign policy,” the “Department of Defense,” “law and order,” or “escalated,” when she is writing about what she calls the “rhetoric about borders and national security and terrorism and democracy and vital interests,” to “balancing the budget,” when she is challenging the pretensions of late capital. In Jordan's radical dictionary, the defining of official terms is a call to the kind of safety that can only be secured when oppressed peoples wrest linguistic and material freedom from the Western colonial powers. Jordan clarified this philosophy of language when she called for a “purification of terms” in her 1985 address at Columbia University. There, she asked her audience, “Is it a good thing, is it a noble thing, is it a mandatory thing that we in the United States of America, arm and train and feed and clothe and house the ‘contras,’ the ‘freedom fighters?’” She urged, “Then let us demand of the President of our country, and let us demand of our Congresspeople, a purification of those terms. Let us demand that, finally, that, at last, we act to support, to fund, and to arm and to bolster the true pro-life forces of the world, the true freedom fighters of South Africa.”³

Jordan's sociolinguistic interventions extended beyond the genres of the definition and the redefinition, which appear throughout her work in quotation marks, to meditations on syntax, grammatical formulations such as the passive voice, and possessive pronouns. The English language was for Jordan, as it was for other Black Arts poets and Black feminists of the early 1970s, a material that one worked with—one worked

or passed through—to slow the processes of capture and co-optation that US governmental agencies and corporations were implementing to defang the militant movement of Black Power.⁴ Ridiculing the man at the Man’s “anti-poverty” desk or the “minority businessmen” selling out the dreams of economic autonomy for Nixon’s brand of Black Power, Jordan makes Black English the language of survival in an era when liberal reform, especially in the form of inclusion in the corporate workplace or electoral politics, dissimulated the evisceration of Black life under the Nixon-era acceleration of the carceral society. In a moment when, as Manning Marable argues, reform “had supplanted rebellion,” Jordan’s writings inhabit Black English as the motor of a rebellious militancy that she kept alive through the 1970s and the following decades. Whereas “most Black leaders were now determined to cast their lot with the system that they had for years denounced as racist, in order to gain goods and services for their constituents,”⁵ Jordan issued militant threats in the language that she was desperately trying to preserve, the language of survival, Black English: “we gone make you *answer* for this shit”;⁶ or “it’s on”;⁷ or “what you think would happen if / everytime they kill a Black boy / then we kill a cop?”⁸

Many recent scholars and artists have turned to Jordan as a people’s poet, an exemplar of radical poetics whose work enlarges conceptions of Black feminist writing and organizing.⁹ This new research has lifted the cloud of quiet that hovered over her work after she published “Apologies to All People in Lebanon,” a poem that explicitly defended the human rights of Palestinian peoples, in the *Village Voice* in 1982. My interest here is in the journalism, drama, and poetry she produced between 1979 and 1985, a period when her work crescendoed its militant calls to collective defense against the retrenchment of the post-1960s era, deepened an intrahemispheric analysis of police violence and military counterinsurgency, mounted an interhemispheric resistance to counterinsurgency through live poetics, and commandeered Black literary form from the incorporative optics of the liberal literary establishment and the university. By the end of the 1970s, Jordan’s interests in the official language of counterinsurgency and in the militant uses of Black English infused her published work in nonfiction, drama, and poetry with an uncompromising politics that would continue to escalate in the ensuing years. By the end of the following decade, the precision of Jordan’s sociolinguis-

tics—to be sure, *geolinguistics* is a better term to describe the studies that put language to work to map the violence of counterinsurgency and to plot, too, people’s militant resistance to it—would result in the censorship of her most affecting work. As Valerie Kinloch describes, “In the 1980s, the *New York Times* refused to ever again print Jordan’s work; her New York City publisher vowed to let her books go out of print; and one of her literary agents removed her from the client list, mainly due to her increasing focus on Palestine.”¹⁰

At the turn of a decade that would witness the decimation of Black urban communities under the surveilling and carceral sweep of the War on Drugs and late-Cold War foreign policies of defense, Jordan articulates Black literary feminism as the radicalization of safety and as the code for urgent, insurgent care. From 1979 to 1985, Jordan’s postintelligence code theorized counterinsurgent intelligence as the very medium of state violence and offered itself up as a key—a strategy of interpretation, a strategy for practice—to a different and insurgent safety characterized by watchfulness, internationalist coalition, and mutual tending.

The Whispering Misery and the Ruckus

In 1979, Jordan wrote the first draft of *The Issue*, a play that was performed as a dramatic reading at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1981. Directed by Ntozake Shange, the play dramatized what Jordan saw as the most critical issue facing Black Americans at the end of the 1970s: police violence. *The Issue* tells the story of a young social movement leader, Lloyd Wilson, who is on the run from police after having issued a threat at a nationally televised press conference: “Every time the police kill a Black kid we’ll kill a cop: Every time, from now on.”¹¹ In a flashback in scene 2, Lloyd is a young boy, seated at a kitchen table in his Brooklyn apartment. When his West Indian father asks Lloyd if he has finished his homework and finished reading Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Lloyd confesses that he could not understand it. He asks his exacting father, “Can I go outside and play?” His father answers, “Yes, you *can*. But no, you *may not go!*”¹² Mr. Wilson trains his son to be a proper, literate, standard-English-speaking citizen in a small kitchen that is heavy with the weight of the times. As Jordan notes in her stage directions, “Instead of walls/windows, there are *things*.”¹³ The space

of the kitchen, walled off from the world and overflowing with “junk glut,” is the site for accumulating the intelligence necessary for proper Black citizenship in an age of rights. This is the very home training, the training in proper citizenship, that Lloyd denounces when he vows revenge after the police murder of a Black teenager. The failure to master Shakespeare portends, then, the failure of assimilation after the civil rights movement and the issue of the militant threat. In Jordan’s work in 1979 and in the five years that followed, scenes of domestication and its refusal brought her sociolinguistic analysis of a growing US empire to aesthetic and political concerns about the promise, and the failures, of freedom and democracy in the post-civil-rights United States.

Jordan wrote *The Issue* at a defining moment in her career. Her growth and productivity as a writer during the period between 1979 and 1985 were evident in her multiple publications of poetry, opinion pieces, and news reports. Jordan had spent most of her childhood in Brooklyn and then at sixteen years old enrolled at Barnard College before marrying and moving to Chicago two years later. She then moved back to New York, had a son, and later divorced. In the 1960s, after her divorce, Jordan worked across artistic and political forms while supporting her family as a single mother. She worked as an organizer in Mississippi, where she was mentored by Fannie Lou Hamer, and as a freelance writer. She served as a production assistant for the film *The Cool World* and collaborated with R. Buckminster Fuller on an architectural redesign of Harlem. She published *Who Look at Me*, a volume of ekphrasis poems accompanied by reproductions of paintings, in 1969. By then, she had begun teaching in adjunct positions, first at Connecticut College and then at the City College of New York, where she taught alongside Toni Cade Bambara, Addison Gayle, and others, and in the mid-1970s at Sarah Lawrence and Yale. Jordan published her novel, *His Own Where*, written in Black English, in 1971 and followed that publication with her first collection of nonfiction. She assumed a tenured post at SUNY Stony Brook from 1978 to 1982. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, she was in residence at several institutions, including Macalester College, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of California, Berkeley. In 1989, she moved permanently to Berkeley, where she founded and directed Poetry for the People and taught on the faculty as a professor of Afro-American studies and women’s studies.

She remained in the Bay Area until she died of breast cancer in 2002. As Kinloch describes, Jordan's was a life lived "writing and fighting energetically, and campaigning for universal peace."¹⁴ When Jordan was drafting *The Issue* at the artists' retreat in upstate New York, she was also writing poems that would later be published in the 1980 volume *Passion*, her fourth volume of poetry.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jordan's previous experience as a civil rights activist turned from nonviolent idealism to horror and the militancy that horror invites. At a moment when revolutionaries were becoming race leaders and the most radical energies of Black nationalism were being co-opted and incorporated when not gruesomely punished, Jordan insisted on the continued relevance of self-defense, nationalism, and an ever-expanding critique of state-secured forms of safety. Jordan's publications between 1969 and her death in 2002 proliferated. Considering the sheer volume of nonfiction, poetry, and children's books that she published (twenty-seven in all)—to say nothing of the drama, musical collaborations, and other media that were produced in her extraliterary forms—against the relative paucity of critical scholarship devoted to her at least partially explains the renewed interest in her work in recent years.¹⁵ However, the lack of critical comment on Jordan's work also forces us to confront the limitations of its opposite, for the visibility that Black women's writing generally achieved during what is widely acknowledged as its renaissance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, paradoxically enough, provided the terms by which the academic marketplace and commercial publishing would archive and taxonomize Black women's artistic labor. At times those terms were quite limited. Would Jordan's novel, *His Own Where*, be widely taught in African American literature classes, for example, had it been chosen as an Oprah's Book Club selection?

In the lectures that Jordan delivered about the context for contemporary African American literature to students enrolled in her class at Yale in 1974, she repeatedly took issue with the optimistic master narrative about the emergence of a Black middle class, the narrative of overcoming touted in Black publications like *Ebony*. She sought other explanations for the decline in Black protest and the disappearance of Black protest literature. She told her students that after 1968, "people got scared." She reminded them of "the Cemetery created by the CRE"

(the civil rights establishment), “the fate of the Panthers,” and “the fate of George Jackson.” She referred, too, to drug addiction (“the turning inward of rage”), “the cop-out”—the process of co-optation that appeased and delegitimized revolutionary movements—and multicultural literary culture. With regard to this latter point, she specified that “the new, general American literature eclipsed and pushed out the Afro-American literature of the sixties.” The destructive elixir of fear, exhaustion, and mainstream literary success created, in Jordan’s words, “the terrible silence that grows” in Black protest literature and in Black American protest culture more generally speaking. From within this field of terrible silence, Jordan provided a key for understanding intelligence and called for the crescendo of the “ruckus,” as she called it, of militancy.¹⁶

Intelligence, broadly conceived, was one of the primary forms that packaged and delivered the retrenchment of the post-world War II Black freedom struggle in the 1968–74 juncture that Jordan was lecturing about. I am using the word “intelligence” to refer to two interrelated developments: (1) the broad culture of *surveillance* that repressed Black internationalist radicalism throughout the 1960s and, especially, after 1968 and (2) the production and careful management of knowledge about antiracist resistance, in part through literacy and literary pedagogy. If “intelligence” names a claim to cognitive capacity, it captures how leftist internationalist activism became knowable to the post-civil-rights world, first, through the brute force of investigation, counterinsurgency, and police violence and, second, through the archiving of the post-World War II social movements. The rise of neoliberalism in response to the 1960s flourishing of social movements and the global economic downturn of the 1970s demanded that the governments of developed nations such as the United States manage dissent ruthlessly. As Keeanga Yamhatta-Taylor explains, the rise of colorblindness shrouded the right-wing resurgence of the 1970s: “The battle in the sixties had legitimized black demands; now that legitimacy had to be rolled back.”¹⁷ The counterinsurgent tactics with which official intelligence agencies and police forces experimented on Black radicals would no doubt prove essential in the punitive management of dissent throughout Latin America and the Middle East after 1968.

On the other hand, intelligence functioned as an *affirmative* process of producing consent to this very repression. For Roderick Fer-

guson, the United States is “the archival nation par excellence,” a state that, like an archive of manuscripts, promises to unite a heterogeneous body of work under a single, official narrative of order. After World War II, the rise of a new mode of neocolonial power that was officially affirmative of difference would, in Ferguson’s words, “test power’s archival flexibility.”¹⁸ Just as neocolonial Britain and France were “admitting recently held colonies into the realm of independence,” the United States was relating to insurgency through engagement in addition to repression, “invitation rather than wholesale rejection”: “The former colonies were thus like documents gathered together into the library of modern nations. As such, these newly minted nations were *consigned* to the location of sovereignty and coordinated according to the ideal of freedom. Yet archiving those former colonies was also a kind of house arrest in which freedom signified genres of subjugation and domiciliation.”¹⁹ This *domiciliation* or *house-arresting* of revolutionary formations was, in Ferguson’s account, a kind of ingestion and dissection: in the US context, the crisis in capital, combined with the threat to national hegemony posed by the antiracist, feminist, antiwar, and student movements, compelled capital to “feed on” local histories and languages, putting difference to work for profit, while the nation-state worked “with and through the very local, vernacular, and subjugated histories and differences that brought the nation-state to crisis in the first place.”²⁰ The domestication of revolutionary projects, therefore, was a process of getting to *know* difference. That process of managing difference through knowledge projects in corporations, governmental agencies, and universities constituted a different, *informal*, if you will, intelligence-gathering enterprise that had profound effects on literary culture and pedagogy.

The formal intelligence enterprise overwhelmed the revolutionary 1960s and ushered in what June Jordan called the “seventies’ of hidden, whispering misery.”²¹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s domestic counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) was, of course, the most well-known governmental entity tying police beat work and investigation to the agency’s objectives of producing intelligence, dispensing counterintelligence, and physically targeting Black Power organizations and activists, or “Black Extremists,” as the FBI described them. By eavesdropping, fabricating correspondence to sow dissension within organi-

zations, disseminating propaganda, repeatedly harassing and arresting targeted individuals, deploying infiltrators, fabricating evidence, and orchestrating assassinations, the FBI mobilized the discourse of domestic security to test the boundaries of civil liberties and to all but incapacitate Black radicalism. The FBI's favored intelligence-gathering tactic was to recruit individuals close to targets—neighbors, family members—and convince them to report on the activities of their familiars. This tactic extended the state's power into the innermost chambers of safety, comfort, and political friendship, making strangers of comrades and confidants and inducing a certain implosion from within.

Against the backdrop of this scene of domestication, which I have described more fully in the preceding chapters, Jordan's resignification of domestic space and domestic work is pointed. Against the rise of reform, Jordan's work actually became more militant after the repression of the 1970s. To consider Jordan's geolinguistic code in this context is to encounter her speaking in code and her speaking of code in the years after domestic and global counterinsurgency brought intelligence into the arsenal of hot and cold weaponry that it marshaled against anticolonial movements. Speaking *of* code, Jordan carefully constructs a Black feminist theory of postwar counterinsurgency's imperial grammars, the "code of pacification," as Ranajit Guha refers to it, valorized and ossified by the "prose of counterinsurgency."²² Speaking *in* code, Jordan inhabits Black English as the language of rebellion: "Let us meet the man talking the way we talk," she writes.²³ In "Black Folks and Foreign Policy," published, indeed, in *Essence* six years after the Sisterhood drew up its plans for *Essence* and *Ebony*, Jordan likened the Reagan-era United States to an antebellum plantation. Originally drafted with the subtitle "Good House Niggers," "Black Folks and Foreign Policy" is an opinion piece on Black Americans' involvement in foreign policy. "Used to be a time when most of us were field niggers," she writes. "Back then hardly any of us stayed up in the Big House, watching de Massa do his thing, throwing salt or arsenic in his soup. But now every last one of us is a house nigger, for a fact. From Brooklyn to Los Angeles, we all stay in the Big House and, what's more, we pays de Massa taxes for our troubles!"²⁴ The metaphor is less an indictment of Black bourgeois apathy and more a call to militant house/field—or domestic/international—solidarities: Black Americans, she writes, "act as though we think we're on the outside, in

the fields, somewhere,” but “this Big House belongs to you and me.” The fields belong, as Jordan has it, to our cousins:

The fields beyond belong to the Vietnamese, the Black peoples of Southern Africa, the Palestinians of northern Africa, the brown and Black peoples of Nicaragua—our victim cousins making their way to freedom. And whether they speak Spanish or Xhosa or Arabic, these new field niggers expect the rest of us, here, in the Big House to watch de Massa and to take appropriate care of de massa’s soup!

Why don’t we do that?

To “take care” of the master’s soup was to withdraw sustenance from the plantation economy and to incite rebellion through the precipitating act of poisoning. Jordan’s call to internationalist sabotage brings the question of language to the space of the home, bringing Black English-asserted militancy to the glossy pages of *Essence*. As Sarah Haley argues, sabotage can be understood as a radical Black feminist practice and epistemology that confronts state with “the will to break rather than the will to tweak”; sabotage is “the rupture and negation of Western epistemologies of law and order, racial hierarchy, and gendered racial difference and docility.”²⁵

Delivered at the very end of the June 1983 issue of *Essence*, between a Bronner Brothers advertisement for Super Gro hair cream and a full-page, Dewar’s Scotch–sponsored profile of the musician Sherry Winston, “Black Folks and Foreign Policy” was, perhaps, in a basket on your bathroom floor or hidden under the mail piling up on your aunt’s kitchen table or under a stack of *Jet* magazines on a shelf in the beauty salon on your corner. There is where it was fulfilling the promise of the Sisterhood, making ruckus and undomesticating the very Black feminist print culture that disappears in narratives of post-civil-rights defeat *and* in stories of Black women’s literary success. As I return to *The Issue* in the next section, I would like to return to Lloyd Brown’s kitchen table, another, more ephemeral site of undomestication in Black feminist literature.

This Is Brooklyn

June Jordan wrote *The Issue* at Yaddo, a four-hundred-acre retreat center for artists in Saratoga Springs, New York. Funded by Spencer and Katrina Trask and opening its doors to creative residents in 1926, Yaddo lies just southeast of the Saratoga Race Course and just north of the Saratoga National Golf Club. By the time Jordan arrived there in 1979, Yaddo had hosted many well-known poets and novelists—Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jacob Lawrence, Truman Capote, Sylvia Plath—as well as been the target of FBI surveillance during the Red Scare. At the campus's center is a forty-five-thousand-square-foot Italian villa with stucco walls and dark-oak furniture. Cherubs carved into sculptures watch over artists at work. The poet in George Parsons Lathrop's 1897 *Yaddo: An Autumn Masque* sings an ode to the inspiring grounds: What maze of sweet enchantment have I found? / Each footfall here seems lost in rippling sound / Of forest breathings, mingled with the tone / Of brooks that whisper, sigh or laugh, alone / Yet lend their music to my heart's at rest.²⁶ Tucked between brooks that, as Lathrop had it, actually babbled and the lake where the Mahicans and Iroquois fished for trout and eel, Yaddo was a place for resting and musing and settling. "Do they deliver mail at YADDO?" asked Jordan's confidant E. Ethelbert Miller.²⁷ Was this safety? Was this any place to be a Black woman, writing? Jordan wrote to the Broadway producer Robert Nemiroff, who had recently written to Jordan asking her to contribute to a forthcoming issue of *Freedomways* devoted to Lorraine Hansberry, that she was completing as much as she could "under these entirely benevolent circumstances."²⁸

The Issue is a little-known, unpublished text in Jordan's massive oeuvre, but she saw it as an important artistic and political accomplishment. In the letter she sent to Nemiroff from Yaddo, Jordan informed the producer that she had just finished drafting the three-act play: "I am passionately eager to have someone such as yourself, and someone such as Lloyd Richards, and Harry Belafonte, and other people capable of mounting a first magnitude production read and consider this work, as soon as humanly possible."²⁹ *The Issue* was eventually performed as a staged reading directed by Jordan's close friend Ntozake Shange and produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival (NYSF). The reading



June Jordan in repose at Yaddo in upstate New York. (Courtesy of Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA)

took place at the Public Theatre in Greenwich Village on April 13, 1981, and featured Morgan Freeman reading the part of Lloyd Brown.³⁰ Gary Bolling, who had appeared in Shirley Clarke’s *Cool World* (1963), a film for which Jordan served as a production assistant, played Lloyd’s close friend Meatball. Other actors included Graham Brown, Frances Foster, and Sarah Joseph. This collaboration with Shange was one of many; it was the fruit of a close friendship between two artists who shared political and artistic commitments. By the time Shange wrote to Jordan in a winter 1980 mailgram, “I STILL HAVE YOUR CHRISTMAS PRESENT AND HAVE BEEN TRYING TO CONTACT YOU ABOUT *THE ISSUE*,” the two had already worked together as playwrights.³¹ In fact, in 1979, she had collaborated with Jordan on a previous Public Theatre production, *In the Spirit of Sojourner Truth*. According to Celeste-Marie Bernier, this earlier collaboration “emerged out of a determination to reject the claim of Michele Wallace’s book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*,” which, as Jordan saw it, denigrated Harriet Tubman

and Sojourner Truth and represented them as one-dimensional activists who were sexually undesirable.³² As Jordan wrote of the collaboration in her 1981 edited collection of essays, *Civil Wars*, the evening of music, song, and poetry that *In the Spirit of Sojourner Truth* staged at the Public Theatre “was the very kind of thing that *Black Macho* declared was non-existent.³³ Shange had also worked with NYSF to stage her 1979 *Spell #7: Beecher jibara quick magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people*, a choreopoem that was first workshopped, then staged as a full production, at the Public Theatre. NYSF produced Shange’s earlier work as well: *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* in 1978 and *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* and *Where Mississippi Meets the Amazon* in 1977. While Jordan was finishing her draft of *The Issue* in the North Studio at Yaddo, Shange was working with the Shakespeare Festival again, this time preparing to direct *The Mighty Gents* for the NYSF mobile that toured the five boroughs of New York.³⁴

While the collaboration between Shange and Jordan was a felicitous exchange of gifts between friends, Jordan’s communication with NYSF intimates that there were some creative differences between her and Joseph Papp, the company’s founder and producer, and Gail Merrifield, director of the Play Department. The staged reading of *The Issue* was initially to have taken place on December 8, 1980, and it was canceled.³⁵ It was rescheduled to appear four months later, but that date fell through as well. In late March 1981, just three weeks before the reading actually took place, Jordan wrote to Merrifield, threatening to withdraw *The Issue* from NYSF. “Throughout this inordinately long saga regarding my play, *The Issue*, a saga more than six months long,” she wrote, “I have endeavored to meet with every change and every disappointment in good faith, and with courtesy, and willing respect for the apparently difficult process entailed by the decision to hold a staged reading.” The fact that no firm date had materialized represented for Jordan “a pattern that suggests disrespect and/or the judgement that this playwright and her commitment to the work . . . are always to occupy the position of the variable / the postponable.” She demanded a meeting to determine a firm date for the reading and informed Papp why she was issuing the ultimatum: “not because I am no longer committed to *The Issue*, but precisely because I am committed to *The Issue*, and to the issues of honor and self-determination raised therein.”³⁶ Within two weeks, there

was a firm date, and the reading proceeded on the afternoon of April 13. The correspondence with NYSF that followed indicates that while the company was considering producing the play as a full production, and Jordan completed revisions toward that end, a larger production never materialized. Discussions about the play, which included the generation of a full casting list, dropped off after October 1981.³⁷

It was at Yaddo, among the whispering waters and singing trees, that Jordan first drafted a play that begins, indeed, with Black flight to white-owned sanctuary. In act 1, scene 1 of *The Issue*, Lloyd Wilson, Jordan's "fugitive Black man, fugitive Black Leader," wakes up from the nightmare in the upstate country home owned by his white girlfriend's parents. When his girlfriend, Claudia, gestures to the home as a refuge—"here we are, surprise, among the trees"—Lloyd asks, "How come, to be safe, I have to be hiding out with you? How come nobody Black got anything, anything safe?" (act 1, scene 1, pp. 11–12).³⁸ At Claudia's "harmonious and elegant" kitchen table, "a pristine orderliness rules the room" (act 1, scene 2, p. 18). Here Lloyd tells Claudia about the nightmare he has just had, a nightmare about police war in Brooklyn. "I'm supposed to be home, see: homesafe," he tells her. "Gonna walk on up the block and buy something: milk or bread." The dream of the quotidian domestic life is interrupted when he passes his mother: "this Black woman / skin so thin you don' never want to hug her too hard and she screams at me." The Black mother's scream alerts Lloyd to an attack by "white commandos"; but, Lloyd clarifies, "this ain happening Overseas this ain the News International. This is Brooklyn" (act 1, scene 1, p. 14). The scene of *domesticus interruptus*, polite country kitchen conversation broken by the reality of urban war and broken by the loud indocility of Black English, marks the opening action of *The Issue* with the politics of undomestication that motivated Jordan's writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like Lloyd's dream, *The Issue* collapses the domestic with the international scenes of intelligence, the "inner" and "outer" wars of US counterinsurgency. The play decodes and recodes safety, making its inquiry into the grammars of intelligence the entry point into a larger sociolinguistic analysis of US empire after 1968. To interrogate the perfect grammars of US empire, *The Issue* undomesticates Black radical speech.

The primary site for this undomestication is, fitting enough, the home. *The Issue* is about Lloyd Wilson's struggle with the personal, existential

demands of Black leadership. The play begins with Lloyd's surfacing as a fugitive at Claudia's farmhouse. They are joined in the second scene by Kimako, a Black queer woman who also works with the Brotherhood, the organization that Lloyd leads. Kimako gives Lloyd the message that the Brotherhood has asked him to return to Brooklyn following the police killing of a Black teenager, Larry Rhodes, a name that conjures the story of Victor Rhodes, a sixteen-year-old who was beaten by the Hasidic Jewish patrol force in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. (In the play's first draft, the name "Victor" is barely visible under white eraser liquid). Jordan discusses the Rhodes case at length in her 1978 article "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death," which appeared in *Seven Days* and later in Jordan's *Civil Wars*. She writes, "Ten years after the assassination of the Civil Rights Era we, Black people, find ourselves outside the door to the hospital ward where Black life, the very remnant breath of Victor Rhodes, hovers in the shadow of death."³⁹ *The Issue's* Larry Rhodes, too, is in the valley of death's shadow, languishing in the hospital after being badly beaten by forty vigilantes. After Kimako reveals that the police have made no arrests and that the police attacked protestors at the protest in response to the Rhodes attack, Lloyd decides to return to Brooklyn. Act 2, scene 1, is the scene of incorporation in young Lloyd's kitchen, in which Lloyd learns the language of assimilation that he will eventually refuse.

The final scene, act 2, scene 2, takes place in the church basement where Lloyd is preparing to speak at a protest rally in Brooklyn. Here is where Lloyd must settle his dilemma and decide whether or not to do so with Claudia by his side. This brings the politics of the bedroom and the politics of the kitchen to the public, political stage as Lloyd weighs both the cost of his desire and the cost of assimilation. Jordan hints that these are the very questions for Black leadership in the post-civil-rights era: Will freedom mean freedom "*across the boards*," as Kimako terms it, the latitude to explore the depths of one's personal, sexual, and metaphysical desires (act 2, scene 2, p. 27)? Will Lloyd step away from the struggle altogether and attend to his family? Will Lloyd walk out of the basement and kneel and offer a statement in favor of nonviolence? Or will Lloyd choose the martyr's way, standing by his defense of self-defense and facing the consequences of certain death at the hands of the police? The play ends with Lloyd's remaining undecided about Claudia (although he has revealed that he wants to marry her) and his opting for the militant's

way toward social justice. The play, then, leaves its audience with no safety at all. Lloyd heads out of the basement. He opens the door, a shot rings out, and the curtain falls.

The set and setting of *The Issue* clarify its sociolinguistics of undomestication. The Brooklyn setting scales down the questions of social movement leadership that the play grapples with. In Jordan's notes about a meeting with fellow playwright and *Village Voice* editor Thulani Davis, she writes, "Lloyd is a Brooklyn leader, and *not* National: 'National' means easier to evade/supercede [*sic*] conflicts between the public & the private," whereas "Brooklyn' means to be honest." Brooklyn is where Lloyd is born and "where he may die," where "he loves, lives, leads, lives, loves," as Jordan says.⁴⁰ Given the context of the play's writing and production between 1979 and 1981, when public longing for charismatic civil rights leadership funneled radical social movement energy toward electoral politics and when, on the other hand, the state's fear of effective Black leadership triggered its manipulation of intelligence to police Black radicalism, Jordan's choice to make *The Issue* an inquiry into the nature of post-civil-rights Black leadership attests to her interest in exposing the racial gendered structure of post-civil-rights Black politics. Jordan wanted the play to show how Black social movements restricted the personal lives of leaders like "Douglass, Fanon, Martin" and "how we forgive the dead, evidently, but condemn the living."⁴¹ At the same time, Jordan's play makes the scenario of Black leadership the basis for a larger set of questions about the possibilities for radical safety—for living and loving, for freedom "across the boards"—in an era of the state-coded security of counterintelligence, counterinsurgent warfare in the United States and abroad. That is, instead of making Brooklyn the scene of splendid charismatic leadership or situating urban space as the new front in a long civil rights battle, Jordan withholds the scene of charismatic performance and instead foregrounds the existential crises that leadership creates against the backdrop of the late-1970s culture of intelligence. Lloyd would like a "A Moment to Breathe," she notes; he would "like to really sit under a tree for a few days."⁴²

Brooklyn, crawling with its bloodthirsty police who cover their violence with the perfect grammar of euphemism and passive voice, brings the urgency of sexual politics and social movement metaphysics into intimate reach. The Brooklyn streets are occupied, and the occupying

force is set to invade the innermost sanctums of Black life. Lloyd's nightmare at the beginning of the play pictures his son, Roger, walking along a sidewalk on Halsey Street. He is "dressed like Vietcong," Lloyd tells Claudia in Jordan's initial draft. He "got a M-15 weighing down his right arm and he's sweat through the Army fatigues or it's blood / some damn thing" (July 1979 version, act 1, scene 1, p. 14). As Roger shows up in Lloyd's nightmare as a street soldier in the domestic war, Lloyd sees the "white commandos moving in closer every minute": "on my home on my mother on my son." Meanwhile his father, "stubborn sonofabitch," is behind the house prettifying things, "tying up rainworm roses to the sticks of the trellis: tying them up with regular household string and thickfingered knots won't hold too tough and the enemy this close!" (act 1, scene 1, p. 14).

The subsequent October 1979 draft of *The Issue* makes the imagery of domestic warfare even more explicit: it begins with the sounds of sirens playing overhead as a montage flashes images of beaten civil rights activists and Black children killed by police onto a screen. Lloyd's stream-of-consciousness description of the dream suspends the rules of standard English. First, it minimizes the inflection of verb forms by eliminating conjugations of the verb "to be," and, as Shange's work often does, it uses the syntactical innovation of the backslash—something between a comma and a dash—to approximate the rhythm of Black speech patterns: "they closing in / thrown a circle around the 'target area' / my own neighborhood and moving forward, roof and stoop and hallways. Even the raggedy backyards got the fuckas coming closer and I'm supposed to be home, see: homesafe: gonna walk on up the block and buy something: milk or bread."⁴³ In a lengthy passage with multiple subjects—the commandos, Lloyd, his son, his parents—often occupying the same run-on sentence, Lloyd is the only subject who occupies the conjugated form of "to be," and even that occupation is often conditional ("I'm supposed to be"). The rendering of the dream in the Black English of Lloyd's stream of consciousness thus unmasks the racial violence of domestic warfare, which proceeded throughout the Cold War, particularly after the 1970s, under the cover of the language of peace.

As Singh argues, racial difference has historically collapsed "discourses of crime and war: criminalization of threats to the social order has been accompanied by a consistent militarization of policing strate-

gies and tactics, even as military action has increasingly been justified for the policing of foreign states recast as failed or criminal regime.”⁴⁴ This collapse of internal policing and foreign war entered a new phase after the urban rebellions in locales as diverse as Watts (1965), Detroit (1967), and Jacksonville (1967). At that point, the architects of US warfare in Vietnam mobilized the counterinsurgency tactics of the quagmire on the home front. As Singh offers, counterinsurgent policing “was imagined as a shift away from large-scale, more violent, less discriminating military intervention.”⁴⁵ The normalization of counterinsurgent policing, as Jordan was careful to point out over and over again, demanded the perfection of state languages of war. In 1982, after the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan returned to the problem of “official state language.” She wrote, “Against official pronouncements such as ‘Security measures have been taken,’ or ‘It seems that an incident has taken place inside the camps,’ nearly half a million Israelis, after the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, demanded another kind of language: an inquiry into the truth, an attribution of responsibility, a forcing of the powerful into an accountability to the people.”⁴⁶ Like the Palestinians evacuating the passive voice, Lloyd’s nightmare of a Brooklyn under siege counters the grammars of security with the freedom language of Black English.

While the city functions, as I have described, as the site of invasion and existential, grammatical, programmatic interrogation, the interior spaces of the upstate farmhouse and the childhood home surface on Jordan’s stage as sites for discursive revision, places where characters decode the “perfect grammar” of empire and send messages of insurgent liberation in the coded language of untamed Black English. The first scene takes place in the bedroom, a space that introduces interracial intimacy, and the dilemmas it creates for Black political leadership, as a central problem. Claudia and Lloyd are lovers who are both committed to Black radical struggle. Throughout the scene, Lloyd expresses his anxiety about Claudia. “You’re white so you can’t be right,” he says (act 1, scene 1, p. 9). Caught between his love for Claudia and his responsibility to the Brotherhood, the organization that he leads, Lloyd alternates between expressing affection toward his girlfriend—when Claudia urges him to get the rifle in case of danger, he responds, simply, “hold me and let me hold you” (act 1, scene 1, p. 8)—and deliberating on the inap-

propriateness of the love affair. Claudia, for her part, affirms her love for Lloyd and her commitment to the struggle for justice. She points out that when Lloyd went underground after he issued the threat to the police, the Brotherhood asked her to find Lloyd and to help him escape upstate. This scene is longer than it appears in the 1979 drafts; it includes the couple's backstory, revealing that they met at a book party for *Roots*. At the party, at Princeton, Lloyd was representing the NAACP; his son, Roger, was also enrolled at the university. Claudia was covering the event as a journalist. The effect is a deeper meditation on the personal life of Black leadership. The play, that is, translates public concerns about the future of Black leadership after the "whispering misery" of the 1970s into the intimate lover-to-lover, relative-to-relative discourses about the future of Black safety.

There are two kitchen tables in *The Issue*. Both represent temporary forts in the post-civil-rights war against Black life, shoddy shelters that the play evacuates as it constructs a more militant safety. The second scene of the play opens in the farmhouse kitchen. It is "ivory white with skyblue / pearl gray points of reference: Butcher block table, lemons, large clean windows letting in much light." It is a "Vermeer environment," where, as Jordan initially describes it, there is a "'wall' of windows/screens leading to a patio leading to lawn leading to woods."⁴⁷ The stage set recalls the serenity and spaciousness of Yaddo: there are doorways all around, and even the wall is not a wall. In this scene, Kimako provides provisions for Lloyd and Claudia, and the three characters discuss Lloyd's next steps. Jordan's July 1979 draft is clearest in its attempt to demarcate the kitchen as a site of interior, existential inquiry that ultimately undomesticates Black activism. In Jordan's first draft, Kimako tells Lloyd and Claudia of the Rhodes beating and the police riot that follows, using Jordan's convention of placing the euphemisms that cover state terror in quotation marks: "We had what turned out to be a small demonstration at City Hall, to protest the Larry Rhodes' beating and the cops, can you believe them, they showed up, several hundred strong, in a 'counter demonstration' and went ahead and *rioted* [underlined in original]. Broke car windows with their nightsticks. Attacked the people in our group; we have fotos of the cops in action And they held these signs up to the tv cameras: 'ONE OF THEIRS IS BEATEN BUT ONE OF OURS IS *dead!*' The Mayor was and has been 'unavail-

able for comment.”⁴⁸ Kimako’s news heightens the sense of calm order that the kitchen scene conjures. Brooklyn is under siege, but the kitchen offers a bright, wide-open space for the characters to consider their options. Kimako is the queer sexual force that holds this tenuous kitchen-table safety together. Left alone first with Lloyd and then with Claudia, Kimako becomes the object of both characters’ desires. Lloyd asks why she and he “never made it,” and Claudia reveals that Kimako had recently broken up with her as well as broken with the Sisterhood, an interracial feminist organization. Kimako “had to make a choice” between the struggle for racial justice and her intimate relationship with Claudia because, she says, she had to be responsible to her son. In this scene, the kitchen offers a queer respite from the normative sexual politics of Black social movement leadership. Here the characters literally feed their illicit sexual and political desires: for interracial romance, for lesbian erotics, for a space of quiet beyond the scene of protest.⁴⁹ The farmhouse kitchen only serves as a temporary haven for errant, undomesticated desire. By the end of the scene, Lloyd has exited the stage to prepare for his return to Brooklyn, the field of battle.

The other kitchen in *The Issue*, the one where Lloyd sits in his childhood home, spatializes the connection between patriarchy, assimilation, and language. In Jordan’s notes after the staged reading of *The Issue*, she includes specific instructions about the play’s kitchen scenes: “Make sure the script carries through kitchen sameness from Act I Scene II to Act II Scene I, and table placement of characters.”⁵⁰ This “sameness” was readily apparent in the early drafts, where, again, Jordan was clearest in her stage directions regarding the kitchen. In the first draft, the kitchen of the Brooklyn brownstone “remains basically the same as described” in the earlier scene. The crucial difference, though, is that the Wilsons’ kitchen in Brooklyn lacks the clarity and openness of the farmhouse kitchen. This kitchen is “afflicted by a junk glut: a radio on top of a roto-broiler on top of a utility cart, a toaster on top of the stove: redundancies that give the impression of a spacious kitchen without space.”⁵¹ Where there is a wall of windows in Claudia’s house, there is a wall of cabinets in Lloyd’s childhood home. The doorways, instead of leading the characters to the woods, lead to a cellar, to a screen door, to a hallway. The physical state of the flashback mirrors the political state of the present: just as the brownstone residents are hemmed in by their junk, so are the

activists impeded by the “issues,” the sexual politics, that are internal to post-civil-rights Black politics.

Young Lloyd is seated at the table when the lights come up on act 2. It is Saturday morning, and Lloyd is coloring in a coloring book depicting Roy Rogers on horseback. The scene mirrors the home training in recitation and self-cultivation that Jordan herself received as a young child. (In her memoir, Jordan reproduces this scene of instruction in the kitchen with many of the details she includes in *The Issue*, including the recitation of *The Merchant of Venice*. When her father sings the praises of Roy Rogers and the settlers, Jordan writes, “I should agree or cheer for ‘The Frontier,’ but I don’t know how.”)⁵² Lloyd’s father, Herb Wilson, enters from the garden, where he has been working, and begins a dialogue with Lloyd. The dialogue in this scene is ironic. Herb ridicules his son’s conciliatory manners, mimicking Lloyd’s “Yes, sir,” with a sarcastic retort: “‘Yassuh, yassuh’: that all you know how to say to me? You tink this is the army?” (act 2, scene 1, p. 3). But Herb also demands Lloyd’s obedience. When he sends Lloyd to do work on *The Merchant of Venice*, he calls him to attention. Jordan’s stage directions note, “Mr. Wilson goes over to the boy and, as he gives each instruction, demonstrates what he means, by actually pushing the boy’s chin up, pushing back the boy’s shoulders, and giving the boy’s stomach a light tap” (act 2, scene 1, p. 6). Herb Wilson’s project is one of domestication vis-à-vis a defiant brand of assimilation: “And you don’ be shuffling, boy. You ain gwine be no run of the mill *negro* sneaking around,” he says (act 2, scene 1, p. 6). Mr. Wilson wants to keep his son safe by keeping him off the streets and away from the “*nigga riff raff*” of the streets (act 2, scene 1, p. 9). He has planned to enroll Lloyd in a private boarding school with hopes of sending his son to school with future “Captains of Industry” (act 2, scene 1, pp. 12–13). The literary instruction I just wrote of, then, is a crucial part of a larger pedagogical project aimed at keeping Lloyd safe by cultivating him the way Herb cultivates his garden. In the Wilsons’ kitchen, the linguistic and literary mastery that a young Black kid pursues by sweating over his homework on a midsummer’s Saturday morning is the answer to the problem of Black premature death. As Mr. Wilson hopes, “He will come out the school like a veritable prince. Among men!” (act 2, scene 1, p. 13).

Literary recitation is key to the pathos of act 2, scene 1. Throughout the scene, Mr. Wilson speaks in West Indian–inflected Black English.

Jordan is careful to detail his accent: “In general, an ‘h’ at a beginning of a word, is *silent*. And the ‘th’ combination is pronounced either as a hard ‘t’ sound or as a ‘d’” (act 2, scene 1, p. 1). The tendency toward assimilation appears first in Mr. Wilson’s instructions to his son. The impulse toward domestication, toward the careful cultivation of proper Black bourgeois citizenship in the age of rights, escalates throughout the scene in the interaction between Mr. Wilson and Mrs. Wilson. Mr. Wilson berates his wife: “You are not me! Look at this. (Meaning the difference between their forearms) You a *Block* wo-mon: A monkey chaser down to you soul. I set you up here, something swell, in this house: Turn it over to you, and what. You wan’ tie my hands. You wan’ drag me down. You wan’ throw that devil child to the streets. . . . You damn Block woman: A mon home suppose be a castle and I have me have to make my own someting to eat! (Outraged) I talk how I want in my own house!” (act 2, scene 1, p. 10). At the height of their argument about Lloyd’s schooling, Mr. Wilson knocks his chair to the floor and slaps his wife. In this scene of domestic terror, Mr. Wilson literally beats his wife and son into submission, demanding that they consent to the dominant linguistic and economic order. As Lloyd studies his Shakespeare and Kipling so that he can compete with the children of capitalists, Mr. Wilson praises his own light skin and terrorizes his darker-skinned wife. Now Lloyd uses his literary knowledge to intervene in the domestic drama. Lloyd runs into the room and offers to recite lines from Rudyard Kipling’s “If”: “If you can walk with kings . . .” (He forgets. Blinks hard. And then remembers:) ‘If you can walk with kings *yet keep the common touch* . . .’ (Forgets again, and then remembers:) ‘. . . why then, you’ll be a man, my son!’” (act 2, scene 1, p. 15). This pleases Mr. Wilson, who goes to fetch ice cream for his dutiful son.

Left alone in the kitchen, Mrs. Wilson offers her son a different kind of literary instruction. She tells him, “I wan’ that you learn something for me: For all time” (act 2, scene 1, p. 17). Mrs. Wilson reaches for her Bible and, finger to page, reads Psalm 91, pausing so that Lloyd can repeat each line after she reads it. Psalm 91 is a song of safety amid terror: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty,” reads the Modern English Version. And “You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor the arrow that flies by day” (Ps. 91:5). At the end of this scene, a *scene of incorporation* that scripts

assimilation as a violent compulsion of West Indian patriarchy in modern Black America, is a second recitation. Whereas the father imposes proper language acquisition through literary instruction, mother and son sit together, embodying the refuge that they conjure and sanctify with each repeated line. This is Lloyd's learning under the protection of and in the interest of a maternal care that exceeds the domesticating energy of the Wilson kitchen. Unlike the homework that Lloyd completes offstage, which offers up literary expertise and linguistic perfection for capitalist acquisition, the biblical recitation is a performance on-stage that admits the utter vulnerability of Black life in police-occupied Brooklyn. The practice in memorization that Mrs. Wilson offers against Kipling and Shakespeare can be understood, then, as a practice that undomesticates the kitchen. More than a site for perfecting the false safety of assimilation, the kitchen is place that invites shared vulnerability: a collective entering into the knowledge that, in Jordan's words, "we will not survive by joining the game according to the rules set up by our enemies; we will not survive by imitating the doublespeak/bullshit/non-think standard English of the powers that be."⁵³ Because the kitchen is not safe and because the kitchen is not home, Lloyd's search for what Jordan refers to as a "homesafe" will eventually culminate in the issue of the threat that may cost him his life. This threat emerges from this place of shared vulnerability to the violent culture of intelligence after the civil rights era.

The prayer-recitation of protection hangs between the safety of the farmhouse and the danger awaiting Lloyd outside the church basement. In act 1, Lloyd finds refuge in the domestic and then refuses it, leaving the farmhouse and returning to Brooklyn with self-defense on his mind. In act 2, Lloyd passes through the domestic scene of his childhood and ends up in the church basement, where he will prepare for his final reckoning with the police. As the shot rings out at the end of the play, the audience is left wondering if the shelter that Mrs. Wilson and her young son hold between their bodies in the kitchen where they are terrorized is enough to stand up to the nighttime terrors and daytime arrows of present-day Brooklyn, USA.

“Pure Terror for Our Lives”

Between the initial draft of *The Issue* in 1979 and the staged reading at Greenwich Village’s Public Theatre two years later, Jordan’s work escalated its militant calls to undomestication. The final work undoubtedly bears the imprint of Jordan’s own intimate experience with police violence. After she finished drafting *The Issue* at Yaddo, Jordan returned to a Brooklyn that looked a lot like the city of Lloyd Wilson’s nightmare. On August 22, a twenty-nine-year-old Puerto Rican man, Luis Baez, was killed by police in his mother’s house. Five days later, Jordan participated in a demonstration at the New York Police Department’s Seventy-Ninth Precinct police station in Brooklyn. The demonstration was organized by the Black United Front, a coalition of activist organizations that joined together against domestic issues like police violence and foreign-policy issues like the United States’ support for Israel and Zionism.⁵⁴ Jordan attended the demonstration with two friends, Gwendolen Hardwick, who was then studying drama at NYU, and the writer and activist Alexis De Veaux. The trio arrived at the demonstration in front of the Seventy-Ninth Precinct station, located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, across the street from what was then Tompkins Park. It was around 6:00 p.m. when Jordan, Hardwick, and De Veaux joined the rally with several hundred other protestors (later estimates would number the crowd between one thousand and three thousand).

Later that night, when Jordan was back home, she wrote of the march, which proceeded in pouring rain. It was “a peaceful protest march”; the protestors “marched peacefully from Tompkins Park.” The protestors were then attacked by police. First, Jordan remembers, the police approached the protestors from behind and threw bottles from their squad cars; then they advanced toward the protestors with their squad cars. When the police retreated, the protestors regrouped and continued “on a very circuitous route that rather widely circled the precinct’s location.” The police then rioted. Jordan writes,

At Marcy Ave and Lexington, we halted and stood quietly in the rain waiting for directions

At this point, suddenly, cop cars came from everywhere abruptly flashing lights & roaring sirens and drove directly into the people

We tried to hold our lines but the cars were ploughing directly into bodies

Everyone was screaming with shock & terror

On the hood of the police car closest to my line 2 young Latino brothers were lying—they had jumped on top in order to avoid being run over

Taking cover behind a cement wall, Jordan, Hardwick, and De Veaux crept between two fences and lay still while cops “came out fast, hunting for people.” “We lay as still as possible,” she writes. “It was pure terror for our lives.” The three made it back to Jordan’s car and then back home, where Jordan recorded what had happened on a legal pad. “This is all the truth as best I can recollect it at this time, 11:10 P.M.,” she wrote. Then she added, “There was absolutely NO provocation from the demonstrators.”⁵⁵

After the police raid in Bed-Stuy, Jordan used the word “terror” to describe the relationship between Black people and the police. In a report titled “Black Power in the Police,” first drafted on August 29 and probably read aloud at a press conference or rally, she described Black America as “a community of hunted people” and a “neocolonial outpost ruled by the police: a colony in which funerals and grief, fear and the screams of the terrorized consume the energy of our collective spirit, the energy of our collective experience.”⁵⁶ Jordan became involved in several collective efforts to hold the police department accountable for its terrorist attack on the protestors. In her own recollection of the events, Jordan referred to the August 27 raid as a “savage attack” and referred to this most recent episode in the “ever worsening, and official, contempt and hatred for Black life” as “Old Blues.” Turning to the “Heavy Dues” of Black life, she rejected the proposal of an NYPD investigation into the attack: “We know that we ridicule the dead if we will even consider action allegedly to be taken on our behalf by the Mayor / the District Attorney / the Police Commissioner. We know the relationship between these public officials and the patrolman abusing the people on the corner of your block: It is the relationship of the guilty and the damned.” Finally she turned to the “Good News,” speaking with hope of the possibility of federal intervention in the form of “an exhaustive, Congressional investigation into the New York system of injustice and terror” and speaking

with even greater buoyancy about “a nationwide turning of attention to this crisis of police violence.”⁵⁷

Jordan also went with De Veaux and Hardwick to a press conference at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, where they worked with other activists to organize a People’s Tribunal and submitted a report, along with a recording of the collective testimony presented at that tribunal, to the local news department.⁵⁸ The tribunal took place at the Brooklyn Armory on September 7, during which eyewitnesses recorded testimony for the press. There De Veaux read aloud the collective testimony of Black artists and writers, noting that the “intentions of the police were not simply to disperse the demonstrators, but attack, bodily, as many participants as they could.”⁵⁹ The written collective testimony, “Unprecedented Police Riot in Brooklyn,” names Jordan, Hardwick, De Veaux, Jill Nelson, Stanley Kinard, and Amiri Baraka as authors. The authors write of the police riot as an attack, exposing the myth of public safety that rationalized the violence: “the intentions of the police were not simply to disperse the protestors but to attack bodily as many participants as they could.” They end the testimony with a list of charges: that the events of August 27 constituted “a full scale police riot,” that the mainstream white press was guilty of “criminal negligence, specifically in deserting the marchers at the close of the rally, thereby avoiding witness to and reporting of the police riot which followed,” and that the city government was complicit with the racist assault.⁶⁰ When they charged the artistic community with shying away from involvement (“We charge with gross negligence those sectors of the Black and white political, artistic, and intellectual community who have refrained from involvement”), they dampened the critique of their first draft, which read, “We charge the blk. [Black] political artistic and intellectual community with gross negligence in their lack of participation in the demonstration and subsequent silence since the police riot which followed.”⁶¹

Jordan’s activism in late summer 1979 was something of a dress rehearsal for *The Issue* and a tragic, dramatic reenactment of the problems of state language that she had been writing about since the early 1970s. The demonstration, the attack, and the organizing that followed gave lie to the understatement and silences that filled newspaper coverage of the police raid. On the day following the raid, the *New York Daily News* reported that “5 cops [were] hurt in Bed-Stuy,” that the police “skirmished”

with the protestors, and that “most of the violence was caused by about 100 youths.” The paper reported that the protestors “pelted riot-clad police” and “wrecked a patrol car with cinder blocks.” The police officers, passive victims for most of the article, are finally described as charging into the crowd not with their cars but with “swinging nightsticks.”⁶²

The August 1979 police riot changed the play that Jordan had just finished drafting upstate. She completed a revision of the play in October 1979. In that version, Kimako’s account of the police riot after the demonstration in Brooklyn incorporates details from the Tompkins Park scene. In the earlier version, the protest takes place at City Hall. All of the later drafts move the demonstration to Tompkins Park. Kimako tells Lloyd that the police outside of the Seventy-Seventh Precinct station “drove the police cars fullspeed into the crowd” and that they were “plowing into” the crowd, “straight ahead” (act 1, scene 2, p. 23). The elaboration of the scene of terror recalls Jordan’s notes and the collective testimony she wrote with her colleagues: “We had to run for our lives—crawling across the concrete (SHE turns up the palms of her hands so the long scratch marks daubed with iodine can be seen) to get away. We had to *try not to breathe*: they were that close!” (act 1, scene 2, p. 23).

Another change was an audiovisual accompaniment, first introduced in the October 1979 version of *The Issue*. Jordan scripted an introduction to the play that called for an audio track to play sounds of sirens, first singing slowly and then “maddeningly intensif[ying],” holding for nearly an “earsplitting minute and a half” before descrescendoing into “a threatening whine.” If the sound here is meant to assault and awaken the theater audience with the ongoing threat of police violence, sound also works to tell the story of hope: intermixed with the siren’s whine is the gospel song “Mary Don’ You Weep.” Jordan added a photograph montage, a “Black and white silent film,” as she called it, above this soundtrack. The montage shows images of police violence against Black people—an Alabama state trooper beats a Black man on the ground; Birmingham police hold snarling dogs at the faces of Black protestors; newspaper headlines flash, reading, “Sheriff shoots would-be voter through head” or “Fannie Lou Hamer Pistol Whipped in Overnight Jail.” There are also images of Black joy and belonging: the play’s main character, Lloyd Wilson, appears in a photograph “holding 3 or 5 year old Black child in one arm, up against his shoulder, while shaking hands

and laughing with a crowd of well-wishers” and “longshot of little girl (among her playmates) posing for camera: big smile.” The photographs also capture Black militancy: “Waist shot of LLOYD in the middle of a running front line of shouting, muscular Black men, arms raised in the Black Power salutation.” The prologue to the play ends with a montage of headlines that normalize, regularize, and euphemize police violence against Black people: “‘HONEST MISTAKE’ SAY COPS: TEEN, 18, DEAD IN SCHOOL YARD,” “BOY, 7, SHOT BY HOLIDAY PATROL,” and so on.⁶³ The sirens blare for a full minute and a half after the images fade. Then the action begins.

Kimako’s elaboration of the police raid heightens the play’s realist rendering of police violence and announces *The Issue* as a revelation of the violence that official state language dissimulates. In contrast, the dizzying flash of photographs, soundtracked by the discordant sounds of gospel singers and squad cars, achieves the opposite effect: not to reveal that which the audience does not know but to force a disorienting audiovisual confrontation with what the audience knows too well: Black life’s quotidian overexposure to the state’s machinery of death.

The August 27 police attack also deepened Jordan’s commitment to a kind of progressive literary production that maintained a critical relationship to its conditions of production. Less than two weeks after the attack and only two days after the People’s Tribunal on Police Violence, Jordan followed Audre Lorde in resigning from the feminist journal *Chrysalis*, citing the Tompkins Park raid as a catalyzing event. Citing what she calls the magazine’s “flagrant disregard of the Black woman in America,” Jordan conjures the memory of that night of state terror: “Two weeks ago, myself and another Black woman poet and another Black woman artist came within 18 inches of losing our lives inside an unbridled police riot in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our crime: To be Black and breathing on the streets of the 79th precinct. Tell me / show me how your hopelessly academic, pseudo-historical, incestuous, and profoundly optional profoundly trifling profoundly upper middle-class attic white publication can presume to represent our women’s culture: the very tissue of our ongoing, tenuous, embattled experience.”⁶⁴ As Alexis Gumbs writes of this exchange, “If racism slept, unfortunately it doesn’t, but if racism slept it would have nightmares about June Jordan.”⁶⁵ Sent just after

Lorde's resignation from the magazine's position of poetry editor, Jordan's missive to *Chrysalis* unleashed the anger that burned in Brooklyn in fall 1979.⁶⁶

After Jordan's intimate encounter with police repression, the urgency of unmasking the violent work of intelligence surfaced in the connections she noticed—or noticed lacking—between US publishing and Black vulnerability to the weaponry of counterinsurgency. This urgency coincided with a commitment that was perhaps even more pressing for Jordan: to enlist her craft as a writer in an ongoing battle against a US imperialism that produced consent through the dulling daily drone of news about counterinsurgent actions around the globe. If *The Issue* undomesticated post-civil-rights Black political speech by focusing on interpersonal relations and the inner life of Black leadership, the work that followed in Jordan's poetry jumped scale to assert its militancy. Jordan's first collection of nonfiction, published two years later, *Civil Wars: Observations from the Front Lines of America*, attests to this critical priority: "You begin with your family and the kids on the block," she writes, "and next you open your eyes to what you call your people and that leads you into land reform into Black English into Angola leads you back to your own bed where you lie by yourself, wondering if you deserve to be peaceful, or trusted or desired or left to the freedom of your own unfaltering skull. And the scale shrinks to the size of a skull: your own interior cage."⁶⁷ As I attend this calibration of scale in Jordan's early-1980s poetry, I return to Jordan's geolinguistics of intelligence.

Can You Say?

The dark-pink lipstick kiss print is still visible at the top of a letter between friends dated July 1982. The dramatist and actress Gwendolen Hardwick writes to the writer and organizer June Jordan, "Received your letter one evening after having come home from work . . . after having read articles in *the Voice* regarding the acts of genocide against the Lebanese and Palestinian people—in the name of a Jewish state. Who will secure the state of the Lebanese and Palestinians? . . . I am reading these articles and feeling such shame . . . that the human race continues such inhumanity upon itself! Some times [*sic*] I wonder what in the world I am doing here in this time and space." Hardwick lists the scenes

of destruction that make 1982 New York feel like the end of the world: the poor Black and Latinx folks in the East Bronx and the Lower East Side, police murder in New York, the “British arrogance in the Malvinas,” the influx of Haitian refugees to the United States. “And what about the Black South Africans? El Salvador?” she asks. At the end of the litany of assaults, Hardwick includes a few simple notes of care: gratitude for the communication; wishes for a speedy recovery after a recent operation. Then, “I love you,” another imprint of lipstick, and then, as if an afterthought: “Happy Birthday!”⁶⁸

We could read Hardwick’s opening and closing passion marks as extralingual, labial-lingual pieces of code: the first mark an invitation to communication on terms other than those fossilized in newsprint, an initiation into a time and space that is other than here, and the second mark a haptic benediction, a goodsaying better left unsaid.⁶⁹ In this section, a further inquiry into the intelligible and unintelligible code of the long war on terror, I turn from Jordan’s 1979 play to two books she published in 1985: a collection of poetry, *Living Room*, and a collection of essays, *On Call*, both of which followed her 1983 trip to Nicaragua. Calling for a purification of terms like “freedom” and “security,” Jordan’s post-Nicaragua poems and essays joined her earlier work’s critique of official state language with her field research on hemispheric counterinsurgency. The internationalization of Jordan’s activism and writing in the early 1980s articulated what Zahra Hussein Ali calls “new political mappings” when the grammars of the long war on terror were collapsing the distance between Brooklyn and Beirut, Managua and Pretoria.⁷⁰ Jordan’s literature was resistance literature; it drew on her long commitment to crafting space, in poetry and in the other genres of writing and organizing she engaged, to train the reader to see the world differently.⁷¹ In a forthcoming book, Meta DuEwa Jones calls this work of retraining through the alchemical processes of literary craft the “afterlove of slavery.”⁷²

While much of the focus on Jordan’s internationalism has centered around her sixth volume of poetry, *Living Room*, particularly its poems about Palestine, scholars have said less about Jordan’s *intrahemispheric* study of intelligence and the poetics of revolution. If Jordan’s linguistic inquiries into white English and Black English gave way to her undomestication of Black political speech in the 1970s and early 1980s (in

July, 1982

Dearest June:

Received your letter one evening after having come home from work (yes i got the job, thank-you for your reference) after having read articles in the Voice regarding the acts of genocide against the Lebanese and Palestinian people - in the name of a Jewish state. Who will secure the state of the Lebanese and Palestinians? The ride to work is long, an hour and a half - feel like I'm going out of state - I am reading these articles and feeling such shame - certainly horror - but shame that the human race continues such inhumanity upon itself! Some times I wonder what is the world am I doing here in this time and space.... feeling so delicate and tender lately.... I want only pretty silk kimonos, flowers

Letter from Gwendolen "Lil' Bit" Hardwick to June Jordan, 1982. (Courtesy of Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA)

The Issue, for example), they also explored revolutionary poetic forms that worked at the limits of language to forge leftist internationalist affiliations between the dispossessed of the Caribbean and of Central and South America, especially Nicaragua.

While Jordan might have celebrated the end of the 1970s “whispering misery” when she spoke of the “resurrection of the spirit” that she was feeling in Brooklyn in 1978, the years between 1979 and 1985 challenged her idealistic resolve.⁷³ There was the serial murder of twenty-eight Black children and adults in Atlanta between 1979 and 1982. There was Great Britain’s bloody defeat of Argentina in the Malvinas War in April 1982, which gave Margaret Thatcher “the political cover she needed to bring a program of radical capitalist transformation to a Western liberal democracy for the first time.”⁷⁴ There was the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans by US-backed and US-trained forces battling the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. In December 1981, over 750 civilians in the village of El Mozote were massacred, leaving only one survivor. There was the callous refusal of refugee status for Haitian asylum seekers. There was the US-supported and US-funded genocide of Mayan peasants in Guatemala: between 1981 and 1983 alone, one hundred thousand were executed. There was massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps in June 1982. There was the US policy of “constructive engagement” with South Africa. There was the US invasion of Grenada in 1983. And, of course, there was that fateful night when Jordan and her dear friend Gwendolen Hardwick crawled on their hands and knees to safety when the Brooklyn police attacked.

Jordan’s relationship with Hardwick was one of many intimate political relationships that she forged with activists and artists against this backdrop of early-1980s intelligence (where “intelligence,” again, means both repression through the extraction of counterinsurgent knowledge and the affirmative practice of knowledge production). These relationships—with Hardwick and Alexis De Veaux, Sara Miles, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Adrienne Torf, E. Ethelbert Miller, Toni Cade Bambara, Etel Adnan, and others—were based in mutual desires to marshal love, language, and bodily strength in the war between what Jordan called, again, the “*true* pro-life forces” and the US-trained armies and operatives that were experimenting with the techniques of torture, information extraction, mass intimidation, and primitive punishment that

would later be unmasked in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.⁷⁵ Jordan's 1980s poetry and nonfiction provide an insurgent map of all the places Hardwick mentions, and many more besides, where partially aligned or nonaligned Black and indigenous peoples were fighting for freedom throughout the late-Cold War years. Her work develops "a spatial imaginary for justice that governing language otherwise obscures," as Keith Feldman puts it.⁷⁶ This spatial imaginary materialized in her poetry and nonfiction on Palestine, South Africa, and Nicaragua as the very scalar analysis that Jordan referred to in *Civil Wars* when she wrote of all the places one's commitment to one's people leads, from the inside of one's own skull to Angola.

Jordan's internationalist imaginary of justice faced off against the Reagan administration's campaign to rid the earth of the threat of communism, a campaign that used the language of democratic idealism to cover for imperial expansion, capitalist plunder, and a sheer thirst to rid the United States of its "Vietnam syndrome." Visiting Nicaragua in the aftermath of the Sandinista revolution, during which US-funded counterinsurgents (Contras) were actively staging a brutal assault on Nicaraguan civil society, Jordan went "on call," as she referred to her mission, to canvas a point of intensity along the itinerary of the long war on terror. Latin America was, at this late-Cold War juncture, a laboratory for the United States' development of "more pragmatic and flexible imperial strategies" that lent authority and might to its rise as a global superpower in the late twentieth century.⁷⁷ The region served as a training ground for US foreign policy and military strategy. Throughout the 1980s, US aggression in Latin America, particularly in the Central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, provided the terms for counterinsurgent rhetoric and warfare that would mature in the latter end of the war on terror. Greg Grandin writes, "The Reagan White House perfected new techniques to manipulate the media, Congress, and public opinion while at the same time reempowering domestic law enforcement agencies to monitor and harass dissidents. These techniques . . . prefigured initiatives now found in the PR campaign to build support for the war in Iraq and in the Patriot Act, reinvigorating the national security state in ways that resonate to this day."⁷⁸ During the war in Nicaragua, the CIA director William Casey and the National Security Council's Oliver North funded the Contras through the covert transnational exchange now known as

the Iran-Contra scandal. The CIA also funded mercenaries from other Central American countries like Honduras. Suspending the scholarly distance Jordan might achieve by using commas and keeping with the Black feminist punctuation of what I like to call the blackslash, she explained, “Armed and goaded by the CIA, *contra* troops based in Honduras daily invaded Nicaragua border towns: blowing up bridges / burning hospitals / ambushing international press personnel / murdering doctors / blowing up babies and tobacco barns.”⁷⁹

US involvement in Central America in the early 1980s revitalized an intelligence industry that was in decline after COINTELPRO formally dissolved in 1971 and after the Senate’s investigation of US intelligence agencies in 1975 and 1976.⁸⁰ What distinguished Nicaragua as a target in the United States’ vicious campaign for hegemony that used Latin America as a laboratory for repression was the discursive scaffolding that the US government erected and the terms—“low-intensity conflict,” “freedom fighters,” “self-defense”—that made the violent repression of Nicaraguan people palatable to the US public. “The Contras were by no means the first anti-Communist insurgency sponsored by the United States,” Grandin writes. “Similar policies had already been attempted in Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, and in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Afghanistan. But no other insurgency was championed for such a sustained period of time in such idealistic terms.”⁸¹

It is crucial to note, though, that these idealistic terms might be unintelligible if not for the Black female’s function as a “national treasury of rhetorical wealth,” in Spillers’s terms.⁸² In the 1985 State of the Union Address, for example, Reagan made the fight for “self-defense” in Nicaragua legible through three figurations of women of color: the redemptive figure of the female Vietnam refugee, the deviant figure of the poor Black mother, and the salvific figure of the elder Black matron. First speaking of the anti-Sandinista forces, Reagan urged Congress to support funding the “freedom fighters” and “continue all facets of our assistance to Central America.” “I want to work with you,” he said, “to support the democratic forces whose struggle is tied to our own security.” Continuing his speech about his “great plans” and “great dreams,” Reagan then turned to Jean Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant who left Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War. Nguyen “studied hard, learned English, and finished high school in the top of her class”; she was now at

West Point, Reagan said, becoming an “American hero” and somehow redeeming the failed mission in Vietnam. Finally, bringing the speech to a close, Reagan turned to Clara Hale, who founded Harlem’s Hale House to care for children in need, especially children addicted to drugs. Reagan went so far as to invite us to Mother Hale’s window, to watch her cradle the children who, we might presume, have been abandoned by welfare queens hardly worthy of the “assistance,” the tax dollars, that might otherwise find their way to the Central American death squads and mercenaries: “Go to her house some night, and maybe you’ll see her silhouette against the window as she walks the floor talking softly, soothing a child in her arms—Mother Hale of Harlem, and she, too, is an American hero.”⁸³

Reagan offers this image of soothing care and soft whispering to sanitize the dirty war he is asking Congress to authorize. This places Black female *not-mother not-mothering*, following Spillers’s classic formulation, in a vestibular relation to subjecthood in the grammar book of the neoliberal United States: we must pass through this “marked woman,” this “locus of confounded identities,” to get to the United States.⁸⁴ (*My country needs me*: is that what this American hero was saying to herself as Reagan pointed to her across the chamber floor?) What the Vietnamese student and the Black mother tell us, says Reagan, is that “anything is possible in America if we have the faith, the will, and the heart” and that “history is asking us once again to be a force for good in the world.”⁸⁵ While Grandin points out that rhetorical flourishes such as these allowed the White House to cast the Soviet Union as the imperialist power against which a revolutionary US force was waging a freedom crusade and that Reagan’s speechwriters “turned the tables on those who portrayed America’s brutal opposition to third-world nationalism as standing on the wrong side of history,” he fails to note how the discursive scaffolding of the Reagan doctrine called on racialized gender difference to signify redemption and to personify the kind of “assistance” that the United States was offering to Central America by way of torture manuals, artillery, guns, and mercenaries.⁸⁶ The soldier and the not-quite-mother are the available subject positions for women of color. Contrary to Reagan’s claim that the two women whom he hosted were proof that “anything is possible,” what Nguyen and Hale signified is that imperial culture had specifically gendered capacities for them: to give life and to take it. Jordan does not disavow the specifi-



First Lady Nancy Reagan (*right*) and daughter Maureen (*left*) applauding as guests of honor Clara “Mother” Hale (*second from right*) and the Vietnamese-born West Point cadet Jean Nguyen (*second from left*) stand with her. (Getty Images)

cally gendered labor of caregiving on which the state’s claims to be providing “assistance” relied. Rather, her poetry reclaims Black women’s care work as a version of security that privileges interdependence and mutual vulnerability across borders. I will return to this point shortly.

Jordan’s analyses of official state language relentlessly expose the racial gendered logics and imagery of state-manipulated terms such as “freedom” “security,” “America,” and “hero.” Discussing the word “safe,” for example, she addresses a woman who was interviewed on television after the 1984 vice presidential debate. “She said she would vote for Reagan because she would feel ‘safe’ with a man,” Jordan writes. “Like George Bush.” She refers, too, to a woman who “said she felt good about Geraldine [Ferraro] because Geraldine ‘stayed calm.’”⁸⁷ These are the terms of safety and peace—the code of pacification—that Jordan rejects, that she had been rejecting since after the police attack in Brooklyn. When she writes of the problem with a “safety” that concedes in advance of politics that “no woman is safe in this man’s world” and then asks if Ferraro would have been wrong for “becoming furious, indignant, disgusted, and thoroughly impassioned, as she righteously reacted to the

lies and the self-absorbed and morbid and patronizing complacencies of Mr. George Bush,” she recalled the critiques of state violence that she offered in the essay that she wrote four years earlier after the protest in Brooklyn.⁸⁸ In “Civil Wars,” she wrote, “This has been the code, overwhelmingly, for the oppressed: that you keep cool and calm down and explore proper channels and above all, that you remain law-abiding and orderly precisely because it is the order of the day that you will beg and bleed, precisely because it is the power of the law of the terrorist state arrayed against you to force you to beg and bleed without acceptable recourse except for dumb endurance or mute perishing.”⁸⁹ In refusal of this tragic reverence to calm and safety, Jordan reinvents the gendered code of the oppressed and provides a catalogue of New Women, women “completely uninterested in keeping calm, women entirely prepared to make a scene, to raise a ruckus and to be shrill, if you will.”⁹⁰ The impulse in Jordan’s work to identify the grammatical and sociolinguistic forms of pacification and domestication and then eviscerate those terms unifies her work throughout the Reagan years.

Jordan’s studies of US empire, honed in close readings of the daily news and in fieldwork in Nicaragua, provided direction for her piercing early-1980s essays, which are collected in *On Call*. “Life After Lebanon,” from 1984, for example, begins with a series of affirmative negations, beginning with the phrase “I am not” and then repeating the phrase “I am glad I am not”:

Let me just say, at once: I am not now nor have I ever been a whiteman. And, leaving aside the joys of unearned privilege, this leaves me feeling pretty good: I am glad I am not the whiteman who warns that Nicaragua is next on his evil list and who, meanwhile, starves and terrorizes that country through “covert action.” I am glad I am not the whiteman who congratulates El Salvador and who supports South Africa. I am glad I am not the whiteman who lies about Managua and who denies asylum to real freedom fighters opposed to Pretoria. I am glad I am not the whiteman who dyes his hair, wears pancake makeup, and then tries to act like the last cowboy out here surrounded by wild Indians.⁹¹

Jordan’s map of the Reagan frontier emphasizes the indispensability of misinformation (“lies”) to the racial gendered regime of violence that

constructed white manliness through the late–Cold War conquest of “real freedom fighters” by the made-up actor in the White House. In this same essay, Jordan defines Reagan as an exemplar of this “new manliness,” the articulation of white masculinity that was, first, garnered by power’s multiscalar predations and, second, justified by the language that at turns euphemized and overstated its assaults. The New Man “preys upon his wife, his children, his Black co-worker, the poor, the elderly, Grenada, Nicaragua, *and he boasts about it.*”⁹² The whiteman who warns while starving and terrorizing, then congratulates and supports while massacring, then lies and denies while bombing, then dyes and tries while conquering, now preys while boasting.

Jordan understands this production of late–Cold War white masculinity as a linguistic project that ties the circulation of terms like “safety” and “security” in the deceitful rhetorical flourishes of policy speeches to the understatements and euphemisms that fill news accounts of state violence. In “Problems of Language in a Democratic State,” Jordan tracks this connection between high rhetoric and everyday speech in news and opinion shows. Analyzing the overuse of the passive voice in official state language (what she earlier called “White English”), Jordan refers to a news talk show on which the four white men hosting the show spoke in terms like “The Federal Reserve has been forced to raise interest rates” or “It is widely believed . . .” In response, Jordan asks, “Is somebody really saying those words? Is any real life affected by those words? Should we really just relax into the literally nondescript, the irresponsible language of the passive voice? Will the passive voice lead us safely out of the action?”⁹³ Returning to the specter of perishing, Jordan argues for the elimination of passive voice and the crescendo, again, of shrill ruckus: “We will have to drown out the official language of the powerful with our own mighty and conflicting voices or we will perish as a people.”⁹⁴

Hardwick’s letter to Jordan was a catalogue of “low-intensity conflict” and proxy war and an inhabitation of the intimate relation that the scene of reading produces between the Black American subject and the devastation caused by US-led and US-funded war in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. (It begins, recall, with an account of her reading the *Village Voice* on the way home from work.) The impression of lipstick, as I mentioned earlier, might be read as a coded call to a different intimacy and a different relationship to letters. In that way, we could read

the imprint as the kiss of poetic knowledge placed in risky proximity to the cartographic project of imperial intelligence. If that poetic knowledge could take on new grammatical and extragrammatical forms, how would they appear on the page? What would they sound like?

The suite of poems that Jordan offers in *Living Room* and that follow her 1983 trip to Nicaragua are a study in the new grammatical forms that she called for in response to the massacres along the Reagan frontier. *Living Room* offers a series of six poems “for” Nicaragua and “from” Nicaragua. “Poem for Nicaragua,” the first of these, is composed of ten couplets addressed to the country, which is personified with “coffee skin” and “outlaw lips.”⁹⁵ The next four poems are gathered as a numbered series, beginning with “First poem from Nicaragua Libre: *teotecacinte*” and ending with “Fourth poem from Nicaragua Libre: Report from the Frontier.” The last poem is “Safe,” twelve tight lines describing a night watch on the Río Escondido. In each of these poems, Jordan toggles or suspends subjects and predicates so that Nicaragua and its people, the object of malevolent care, exert their force on imperial grammars, taking over the subjects of narration and narration itself. In “Poem for Nicaragua,” for example, the first three stanzas offer descriptions of the *you* addressed in the poem, conceivably the country itself, by offering subject complements detached from the second-person subject (*you*) and transitive verb (*are* or *were*):

So little I could hold the edges
of your earth inside my arms

Your coffee skin the cotton stuff
the rain makes small

Your boundaries of sea and ocean slow
or slow escape possession

The subject of the poem casts a hold over the speaker who could, or would, “hold” the subject “inside” the speaker’s arms. This hold that the withheld, withholding subject “escap[ing] possession” has on the speaker who longs to hold the subject surfaces in the truncated verses, the lines without subjects or transitive verbs. If the subject cannot be

held, they can neither be captured in language. Instead, they are the one who captures, by way of a compulsion, that liberates: “Even a pig would move towards you / dignified from mud,” reads the fourth stanza. The first conjugated verb that the poem iterates is the conditional “would” of a hog transcending its earthly ties. The diminution of the subject—a subject “So little,” made “small”—conjures a childlike innocence that is later belied by the same subject’s “outlaw lips” curled in a snarl and the image of a hand holding a gun: “A pistol calms the trembling / of your fingers.” The poem offers an impression of a subject’s “slow escape possession” rather than a mimetic account of a subject’s appearance. Indeed, the most material, actually concrete, image in this poem, composed of surreal figures, is an image of speech overwhelming the boundaries of civil speech and complete sentences:

Your inside walls a pastel stucco
for indelible graffiti:
movimiento del pueblo
unido

“Poem for Nicaragua” is addressed to a subject who eludes capture in language, whose *withholding hold* possesses the speaker. The subject is not a figure who appears in or along the dictates of a linear space-time continuum that is implied by conjugations of the transitive verb “to be.” Rather, the subject of the poem is imminent, is *among*, a landscape to which that the speaker of the poem can only gesture when she, at last, in the last two stanzas, shows up in the first person:

I imagine you among the mountains
eating early rice

I remember you among the birds
that do not swallow blood.

The entry into *Living Room*’s Nicaragua poems, then, arranges language to withhold the subject of its lines. This withholding challenges the grounds on which Nicaragua would otherwise come to be known through the projects of affirmative incorporation or surveillant

repression that I have gathered as two modalities of the late–Cold War project of *intelligence*. All that is knowable about Nicaragua, here, is the indelibility of its people united in self-defense, an indelibility not quite captured by the poem’s single Spanish-language stanza, a stanza that is, again, about wayward language’s spray-painted defilement of the bounded.

Poems like “Poem for Nicaragua” democratize poetic form. They show the influence of the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardinal, whose poetic *exteriorismo*, Barbara Harlow describes, offers “a documentary account” of the daily revolutionary struggle.⁹⁶ If democratic language, for Jordan, could eviscerate the forms of speech that enable Americans’ complacent consent to unchecked capitalist expansion, low-intensity warfare, and urban policing, it would appear in poetry as “a reverence for the material world that begins with a reverence for human life,” as Jordan wrote in a celebration of the kind of “people’s poetry” she identified with Walt Whitman. It would “bear an intellectual trust in sensuality as a means of knowledge”; it would have “an easily deciphered system of reference”; it would embrace “collective voice, and, consequently, emphatic preference for broadly accessible, spoken language”; and it would “match moral exhortation with sensory report.” It is this last wish, for a radical democratic poetics that could “tell the truth about this history of so much land and so much blood” by making the demand of the ethical (“moral exhortation”) tantamount to the demand of the apparent (“sensory report”), that suffuses the poems on Nicaragua with a sensory detail that eludes photographic intelligence and escapes the frames of liberal democratic regard toward Latin America—the very frames projecting Mother Hale’s home in Harlem as the scene of a dirty war authorization, a dirty war’s authorization—that, in fact, enabled the Contra war.⁹⁷

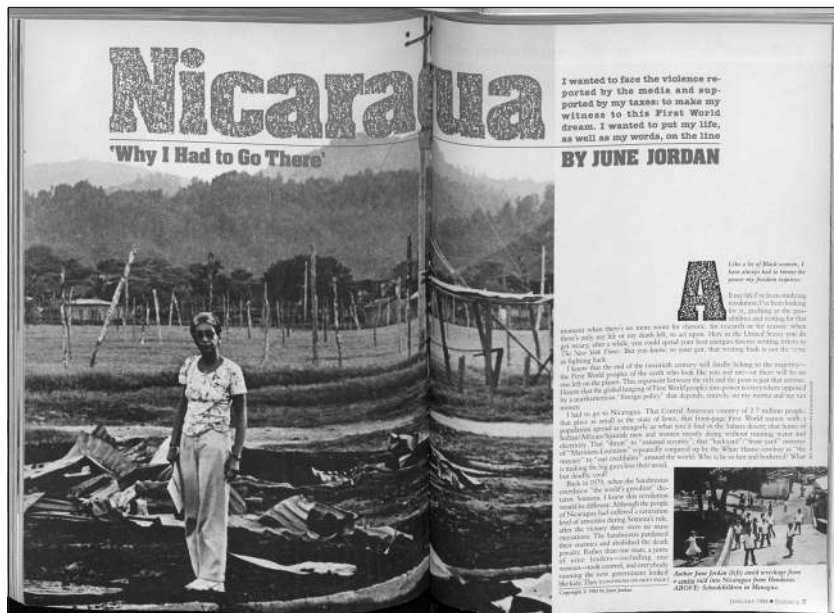
The poems that Jordan wrote for and from Nicaragua appeared in print after her visit to Managua and its surrounding areas. In May 1983, Jordan met with Francisco Campbell, the first secretary of political affairs at the Nicaraguan embassy in Washington, DC, who invited her to visit Nicaragua. She then wrote to *Essence* pitching the essay that was eventually published as “Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There” in the January 1984 issue of the magazine. In her letter to the *Essence* editor Cheryll Greene proposing the trip to Nicaragua, she pitched two different feature story ideas—one on the Black Atlantic-coast community

of Nicaragua, focusing on its foodways, music, and dance and telling the story of the 1979 Sandinista revolution through this lens, and one on the revolutionary women of Nicaragua, which would describe “the Nicaraguan women’s achievements, crises, programs, self-images, and concepts of womanhood and revolution, both.” Jordan included in her letter to Greene a brief history of the revolution and, importantly, the history of revolutionary poetry. Poetry “occupies a preternaturally central and essential place in the life of the Nicaraguan peoples,” she wrote. “For example, regular poetry workshops are conducted, and poetry-theatre presentations mounted, throughout the country side [*sic*], as well as among the militia units right now defending the northern borders of Nicaragua.” She asks, “Why is poetry the national language of this country?”⁹⁸ In a memo for Campbell, Jordan included a list of traveling companions that included the poets Sara Miles (Jordan’s partner), Kathy Engel, Robert Bly, Jim Scully, and Arlene Scully; the *Newsday* editor Les Payne; and the *Freedomways* editor Jean Cary Bond. She coordinated with Campbell to arrange interviews, secured a letter of introduction from the Nicaraguan minister of culture, and planned her June trip. She decided that she would draw on her experience as a photojournalist and take responsibility for the photographs herself, but it is probably the photographer Jonathan Snow, Engel’s partner, who took the photograph featured in *Essence*.

When Jordan published *On Call* and *Living Room* two years later, she reclaimed the authorial control that the magazines’ editors stripped from her when she submitted her stories on Nicaragua. When she first returned from Nicaragua in summer 1983, she submitted pieces to *Ms.* and the *Village Voice*, then wrote a third piece for *Essence*. By fall, she was still going back and forth with Cheryll Greene, the *Essence* editor, about her essay, “Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There.” At the time, Greene was executive editor and special projects editor for *Essence*. The exchange between Greene and Jordan might even be understood as an extension of the efforts to transform convivial Black feminist bonding into material publishing opportunities that guided collectives like the Sisterhood. As Alexis Gumbs argues, Greene was responsible for creating “transnational black feminist critique in what otherwise would have been a black beauty and lifestyle magazine” during her time there, from 1979 to 1985. She “orchestrated interviews with revolutionary women who were

decolonizing African nations, radical conversations between Angela Davis and June Jordan, mind-blowing statements from Lucille Clifton and Toni Morrison, tangible resources for how black women with the weighted privilege of U.S. citizenship could act in solidarity with black women targeted by U.S. imperialism in Haiti, Nicaragua, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Grenada.”⁹⁹ For Thorsson, too, Greene worked in a network that stretched through and around the Sisterhood to “to realize a radical abundance of possibility for Black women writers.”¹⁰⁰ Urgent to get the essay on Nicaragua to print, Jordan wrote a middle-of-the-night appeal to Greene for more editorial latitude, writing, “I have done several rewrites, by now, as you know. I have now done my best, each time. I do not believe this final best effort will fail your hopes, or the interests of the readers of *Essence* or my love for all First World peoples.”¹⁰¹ The essay appeared as a feature in *Essence* two months later, with Jordan appearing in a photograph of a desolate landscape on a double-page spread. The photograph of Jordan, with shoulders slightly hunched and lips pursed in consternation, serves as a fitting picture of the exhaustion she had reached as a self-described revolutionary writer: “Here in the United States you do get weary, after a while; you could spend your best energies forever writing letters to the *New York Times*,” her words read. “But you know, in your gut, that writing back is not the same as fighting back.” The *Essence* article, conveying this mix of rage and inspiration, was reprinted in *On Call*. The *Village Voice* published an October 1983 feature titled “Black Power on Nicaragua: ‘Leave Those Folks Alone,’” in which Jordan argued that Black people’s opposition to the US support for the antirevolutionary forces stemmed from their “disaffection from American ‘democracy.’” She called this disaffection “Black realism.”¹⁰² *Ms.* did not print any of Jordan’s essays on Nicaragua. When Jordan collected her essays on Nicaragua in *On Call*, along with “Life After Lebanon,” “South Africa: Bringing It All Back Home,” and several other essays addressing US foreign policy, she described the collection this way: “my political efforts to coherently fathom all of my universe, and to arrive at a moral judgement that will determine my future political conduct.”¹⁰³

Progressive publishers printed the pieces of Jordan’s Nicaragua archive. Thunder’s Mouth Press, the progressive imprint of Perseus Books that had recently published Sonia Sanchez’s *Homegirls and Hand Gre-*



June Jordan, “Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There,” *Essence*, January 1984.

nades (1984) and Jayne Cortez’s *Coagulations* (1984), published Jordan’s *Living Room*. The nonprofit progressive publisher South End Press published *On Call*, which opens with Jordan’s account of her struggle to get her arguments to print. “In a sense, this book must compensate for the absence of a cheaper and more immediate, print outlet for my two cents. If political writing by a Black woman did not strike so many editors as presumptuous or simply bizarre, then, perhaps this book would not be needed. Instead, I might regularly appear, on a weekly or monthly schedule, as a national columnist.” She writes here, too, of being “whitelisted” by editors who, as she says, “hide behind ‘many of us’ who ‘have problems’ with me. Apparently, there is some magisterial and unnameable ‘we’ who decided—in the cowardly passive voice—what is ‘publishable’ or not.”¹⁰⁴

With *On Call* and *Living Room*, Jordan defied the publishing difficulties she faced after her writings on Palestine appeared in print the summer before. In *On Call*, she studies the map of the Reagan frontier and dissects the official state language that justified the bloody counterinsurgency in Nicaragua. Recounting her travel to Managua in “Nicara-

gua: Why I Had to Go There,” a version of the essay that first appeared in *Essence*, Jordan begins with the sarcastic quotation marks that had by then become characteristic of her prose: “I had to go to Nicaragua. That Central American country of 2.7 million people, that place as small as the state of Iowa, that front-page First World nation with a population spread as meagerly as what you’d find in the Sahara desert: that home of Indian/Africa/Spanish women and men mostly doing without running water and electricity. That ‘threat’ to ‘national security,’ that ‘backyard’/‘frontyard’ monster of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ repeatedly conjured up by the White House cowboy as ‘the menace’ to ‘our credibility’ around the world?”¹⁰⁵ The truth-telling mission that Jordan undertook was, as she intimates here, a sociolinguistic one and a geographic one; it was a study in the way language arranged the Reagan frontier.

Jordan challenged her readers to examine their assumptions about Central America: “Unless you are careful, you might conclude that Nicaragua is nowhere and that nobody lives there, and so, why not do whatever might cross your imperial mind?”¹⁰⁶ She then writes of the bodily postures of vulnerability that refuse and indict that imperial mind and its ideas of security. Traveling through the Central America to bear witness to the struggle for real democracy, she writes, “This is a journey of harrowing hopscotch. And I feel there is no controlling the odds. Either I leave Nicaragua or I accept the palpably enveloping chances of death. The strain of such ultimate alert tires the body. But as the Sandinistas say, ‘the enemy is everywhere.’ And as I move among the intricate disasters, as I track through the spreading bloodstain of U.S. Foreign policy, there is no denying *this is the truth of things*.”¹⁰⁷ Inside this truth, that the enemy is everywhere, Jordan finds an unlikely temporary refuge in the commons. In this refuge, one does not rest easy; one stalks and tracks the trail of blood that counterinsurgency leaves behind; and one uses one’s homegrown paranoia as sustenance.

When Jordan’s vehicle runs out of gas, she has to sleep in a public park in Juigalpa. There she is protected until dawn by Sandinistas who patrol the surroundings, watching for watchers. She finds out that the militia patrolling the street is made up of young women who talk and laugh to stay awake while watching for the enemy. One of them tells her, “You see, we never sleep.” Jordan writes, “I look at the trusting of her twenty-six year old face. In my mind I flip through images of North

American nuclear weapons and fighter planes and cluster bombs, and I lower my eyes and turn away from her. She cannot imagine the complicated, the evil might of this enemy she thinks to deter with laughing young women who must struggle to stay awake.”¹⁰⁸ Just after this, a fifteen-year-old boy takes her inside to rest in a police station, and they talk about poetry until dawn. “Even now,” Jordan writes, “I can hear Faustino: talking to me, softly, close to the ending of the night,” which leads her to ask finally, “How many of these gentle people have I helped to kill just by paying my taxes?”¹⁰⁹

Jordan’s essays in *On Call* challenge readerly assumptions about the benevolence of US foreign policy and invent forms of safety that throw off the conventions of liberal regard for the global dispossessed. This refusal of liberal regard is apparent in “Poem for Nicaragua”’s withholding hold. And this inhabitation of the kind of safety that eludes liberal regard is apparent in “Safe,” in which Jordan’s speaker occupies the “edges of deep water possibilities”:

helicopter attack
 alligator assault
 contra confrontations
 blood sliding into the silent scenery

A single conjunction turns this catalogue of danger into a story of intimacy: the speaker is “cold and wet / but surrounded by five compañeros / in a dugout canoe.”¹¹⁰ The speaker’s leaning into this dangerous surround, Jordan’s leaning into the rocking chair next to Faustino: these are “deep water possibilities” that redraw the map of Reagan’s hemisphere.

The poems that follow “Poem for Nicaragua” in *Living Room* heighten Jordan’s indictment of North American innocence and her attention to these forms of care amid devastation. In “First Poem from Nicaragua Libre: *teotecacinte*,” Jordan reproduces formal elements of “Poem for Nicaragua”: the withheld or deferred subject and the second-person address to question “White English” assertions of the righteousness of the Reagan frontier. The poem refers to Teotecacinte, the Nicaraguan village near the border of Honduras where Sandinistas fought against counterinsurgents in mid-June 1983, when Jordan was there on call.

The *New York Times* reported that the Contras, “insurgents,” attacked Teotecacinte for eight days before retreating back to Honduras. It reported property damages of over \$15 million and noted that eleven tobacco warehouses were burned along with eleven homes.¹¹¹ The *Times* represents the invasion of Teotecacinte as a battle between the counterrevolutionaries stationed in Honduras and Nicaraguan rebels and lists only the deaths of 140 contras and 48 Sandinistas, normalizing and distancing violence as an unfortunate, unpreventable, and intrinsic part of third-world existence. It relegates violence “to the recessive picture plane” and “presents the mutilated bodies as merely adjuncts to something larger.”¹¹²

Jordan’s poem, surfacing what Ali calls an “aesthetics of memorialization,” zooms in on the space that is, in photographic terms, represented aerially in the article. Unlike the *Times*’ representation of the battle as a border skirmish far from US soil or US interests, Jordan’s second-person address indicts US complacency while refusing the liberal regard of identification. The first stanza offers two questions:

Can you say Teotecacinte?
Can you say it,
Teotecacinte?¹¹³

The questions first function as a lesson to English speakers, an invitation to North American readers to consider the cost of US-backed war. But whereas the poem first offers up Teotecacinte as the object of speech, the object that might be spoken *by* a US subject, the second iteration of the question makes Teotecacinte the “you,” the subject of the address: “Can *you* say it, *Teotecacinte*?” (emphasis added). This revision of the poem’s guiding question in the first stanza, which is composed only of these three lines, reveals the poem’s interest in both making the suffering of Nicaraguans visible and occluding the terms of that visibility. The speaker addresses, then eclipses, the English-speaking “you.”

The second stanza accomplishes this revelation-occlusion by representing the human victim of an artillery attack through a kaleidoscopic gaze that approximates the impressionistic rendering of “Poem for Nicaragua”:

Into the dirt she fell
 she blew up the shell
 fell into the dirt the artillery
 shell blew up the girl

The arrangement of the verses mimics the scene of explosion it is describing. Jordan reverses the rhyme of “fell” and “shell” in the first two lines, placing those words at the beginning of the following two lines. The repetition and rearrangement of the word-phrases “fell,” “shell,” “into the dirt,” and “blew up” throughout these four lines intimate words landing on the page: the poem, like the earth under the girl’s feet, is scattered in pieces. Jordan also toggles the subject-verb placement throughout these lines to shatter the language with which she writes of the unsayable destruction in Teotecacinte. The subject follows the preposition in “Into the dirt she fell”; then, in the following line, she becomes the active subject who goes so far as to explode what is exploding her: “she blew up the shell” before “shell blew up the girl.” The internal rhyme of “fell”/“well” and “shattered”/“scattered” in this same stanza re-creates the figurative effect of “fell” and “shell,” the effect of zooming in on a scene whose destruction is reflected in language:

the little girl of the little house fell
 beside the well unfinished for water
 when that mortar
 shattered the dirt under her barefeet
 and scattered pieces of her four
 year old anatomy

The use of rhyme throughout the poem mimics children’s literature and song. Like nursery rhymes with their iambic meter and their simple rhyme schemes, “First Poem from Nicaragua Libre” attempts something of a primer for its readers. It is teaching an audience how to address—to literally enunciate—Teotecacinte, a town razed by US-sponsored terror. But the internal rhyme destabilizes this very lesson: it is not as simple as it appears; the words are not where they should be, and neither is the girl the words are describing. The poem repeats its question three more

times. Its last two stanzas return to the toggling of object and subject that opens the poem:

Teotecacinte
 Can you say it,
 Teotecacinte?

Can you say it?

Repeating the question as if teaching a child how to speak, the poem references the young girl's lost vitality and lost innocence. As importantly, it denies the audience the very innocence of liberal regard. If, as Judith Butler suggests, *intelligibility* is "the general historical schema" that founds "domains of the knowable" and produces "norms of recognizability" that serve to affirm existing relations of power, Jordan offers a description of death that holds off the liberal consumption of victimhood from a comfortable distance.¹¹⁴ Instead of asking, "Can you *see* it," the poem asks, "Can you *say* it," inviting readers to iterate their own complicity only to, again and again, destabilize the very *you* to whom the question is posed.

Other poems in *Living Room* develop this interest in picturing and sounding the devastation of the Reagan doctrine in ways that confront the US media's conventions for representing the suffering of Black and brown peoples. As Ali outlines, Jordan's "kaleidoscopic description" of the 1982 invasion of Beirut in *Living Room* "offers the reader the controlled, decelerated rhythm of an attention-giving frame of mind." In "Moving towards Home," for example, Jordan "achieves a somber mood and a powerful, state tempo through the simple, bare, straightforward, yet intense language of parallel short sentences."¹¹⁵ Throughout *Living Room*, Jordan disrupts the apathy of the North American news consumer while refusing the uninterrogated sympathy that might allow easy consent to the policies of malevolent "assistance" in Central America.

We can see this refusal of both apathy and sympathy in the poems in the "Nicaragua Libre" suite. The third poem, "from Nicaragua Libre: photograph of managua," proceeds as a series of negations and truncations that begin, indeed, from the truncated title (this is the only poem in the four-poem series that lacks a number indicating its placement).

While its conceit is ekphrasis, the speaker of the poem refuses to describe the subject of the photograph that its title refers to:

The man is not cute.
 The man is not ugly.
 The man is teaching himself
 to read.¹¹⁶

The speaker describes the subject of the photograph's actions rather than his appearance; this disallows the perception of a passive victim. What is more, the action being described is an insurgent inhabitation of literacy: "He tracks each word with a finger / and opens his mouth to the sound. / Next to the chair the old V-Z rifle / leans at the ready." In another portrait-not-portrait of domestic life undomesticated, Jordan invites the reader into this home space, promising a "photograph," only to suspend the Manichean scheme of revulsion and paternalism with which readers/viewers might otherwise apprehend suffering. As Ali suggests about "Moving towards Home," Jordan slows the pace of apprehension. In this case, the relaxed tempo invites the reader to notice the domestic details that contradict ideas of Sandinistas as terrorists:

The dirt of his house has been swept.
 The dirt around the chair where he sits
 has been swept.
 He has swept the dirt twice.
 The dirt is clean.
 The dirt is his dirt.

The shifts in verb tenses describing the man's relating to the dirt and the dirt's relating to the man—from the passive voice "has been swept" to the past perfect "has swept" to the present "is"—describe a would-be tranquil domestic scene becoming active. Importantly, *things* that might escape notice in a photograph are living actants in the poem. While the man "is not," the dirt "is." This attention to the living undomesticability of objects makes visible, if impressionistically, "what might otherwise lie submerged in the flood of media images and the constant cascading of its mundane discourses," as Ali suggests.¹¹⁷

Locating the revolutionary vitality that is missing both in daily news accounts of counterinsurgency and in the high rhetorical performances of the president and his officials, Jordan's poems from "Nicaragua Libre" chart a Black feminist geography. Here, visiting with her cousins way down south, Jordan stakes a claim to place that, in Katherine McKittrick's words, is "not naturally followed by material ownership and Black repossession but rather by a grammar of liberation, through which ethical *human*-geographies can be recognized and expressed."¹¹⁸ (If McKittrick, following Sylvia Wynter, would call these geographies "demonic," Reagan no doubt would have, too.)¹¹⁹

The following entry in the "Nicaragua Libre" suite, "Fourth Poem from Nicaragua Libre: Report from the Frontier," returns, presumably, to Teotecacinte and offers a picture, if we can call it that, of another scene of explosion. Its first stanza is a sentence with no subject at all:

gone gone gone ghost
 gone
 both the house of the hard dirt floor and the church
 next door
 torn apart more raggedy than skeletons
 when the bomb hit
 leaving a patch of her hair on a piece of her scalp
 like bird's nest
 in the dark yard still lit by flowers¹²⁰

In a poem that is an eerie catalogue of what remains after a Goliath's attack on this little village with its little girl, there is a single subject preceding a single verb: "I found." The lines that follow this intimation of discovery continue the catalogue of disaster, pointing to "the family trench empty," later "shards/shreds," later "dead hanging plants," and later, "many dogs lost." The speaker's location of that which cannot be "found," or reconstituted or revitalized, casts the poem into the world of ghosts whose absence presses on the lyric I/eye with the same withholding hold I mentioned earlier.

Jordan's Nicaragua essays and poems marshaled the intelligence of touch and the grammars of withholding against the intelligence of surveillance, counterinsurgency, and moderate political reform. Like the

marks of rageful love framing Hardwick's letter recalling the protest in Brooklyn and indexing an internationalist passion for justice, Jordan's Nicaragua archive coded messages of insurgent survival in a historical moment when the most powerful weaponry of the West was aimed at what Jordan called "the global lunging of First World peoples into power."¹²¹

Mood: Imperative

Jordan's work in the late 1970s and early 1980s theorized the long war on terror as a racial gendered regime whose front line was language. Her work at this juncture also sought to "wrench language from the clutches of normalized violence and turn it toward other ends," as Feldman writes.¹²² While Jordan decoded the grammars of counterinsurgency, she encoded messages of liberation: in Black English, in undomesticated Black militant speech, and in the withholding morphology of her poems. Of course, Jordan crafted her postintelligence code with a keen eye toward the discourse of counterterrorism and protection of US security interests in the Middle East. As she organized and created in defiance of the "ultimate taboo" of Palestinian self-determination, she applied her analyses of "the male white rhetoric about *borders* and *national security* and *terrorism* and *democracy* and *vital interests*" and she exploded the conventions of political writing and behavior in US literary culture.¹²³

These explosions, set off in poems like "Apologies to All the People in Lebanon" and "Moving Towards Home" or in essays like "Life After Lebanon," no doubt contributed to the cloud of silence that has surrounded Jordan's work. In a letter sent after *Living Room* was published, her friend the Lebanese writer Etel Adnan encouraged Jordan not to be derailed by criticism her poetry: "You know that 'Beirut' divides the world in two. It is one of the most untouchable 'taboos' for some. That's why. They never forgive you for thinking that Arabs are human beings. It is the one issue that one doesn't tackle without paying a price." In this same letter, Adnan turns from the grim matter of censorship to the militant pleasure-making that these two might pursue together:

Let's have fun!

The city planner in you must love paintings. The human being in you loves Beirut and Manila. The poet in you loves the clouds and the child in

you puts bombs under the police cars when they shoot the wrong people.
Let's have fun!¹²⁴

Adnan's use of the imperative mood ("let's") infuses the suggestions that Adnan poses—to make art, to dream of freedom, to sabotage the means of police murder—with an air of mischievous play. Like Jordan's suggestion to "take appropriate care of de massa's soup" in "Black People in Foreign Policy," Adnan's flight of imperatives posits an ethic of care that reclaims care from government initiatives and places it in the hands of revolutionary artists and activists: dreamers tending to each other, tending to Beirut and Manila, tending to the dead.

This reorientation of care affirmed Jordan's project of "purifying" the grammars of US empire. Jordan's analysis of the sociolinguistics of the early war on terror inhabited, like Adnan's urging toward mischievous militancy, the imperative mood. Recall that Jordan's address to Columbia Students urged, "let us demand of the President of our country, and let us demand of our Congresspeople, a purification of those terms."¹²⁵ The repetition of the imperative "let us" in the address to students, like Adnan's "let's," activates a militant care that draws Manila, Beirut, Brooklyn, Teotecacinte, and Palestine together in a circle of convivial, stubborn intimacy.

Jordan's craft, perfected in trenchant essays and let loose on poetic experiments, posited another kind of intelligence: the kind of live, experimental, extraliterary presence that Barbara Christian, with Jordan and Audre Lorde on her mind, defined as "a tuned sensitivity to that which is alive and therefore cannot be known until it is known."¹²⁶ And if it was imperative in 1979, or 1983 or 1985, to locate the grammatical and extragrammatical forms that would interdict the imperial grammars of Blackness that, for example, invited you to cozy up with a Black woman's book so that you could be a better citizen or, for example, called on an aging Black not-mother to smile in assent to Contra war in Nicaragua, it was even more so in the decades to come, when Blackness increasingly circulated throughout visual culture to win favor for the wars in Iraq and, especially after the 9/11 attacks, when Blackness in high places shielded the government from critiques of its imperialist march to unending war. In chapter 6, I analyze how Black women's literature after 9/11 carried this imperative forward.