

June Jordan

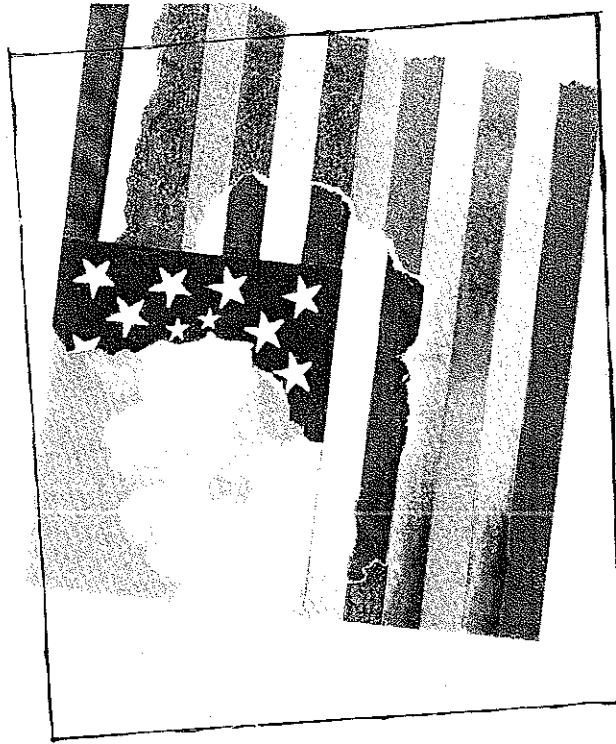
Technical Difficult

African-American Notes on the State of

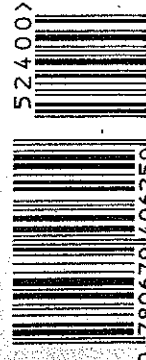
Technical Difficulties

"[June Jordan's writings are] a major and indispensable reading experience... We see at work the committed, passionate, revolutionary creative mind that will, when embodied in the collective consciousness of us all, help deliver us from the deceptions, if not the violence, of American life."

—Alice Walker



June Jordan



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PANTHEON

**D O N ' T
Y O U T A L K
A B O U T
M Y
M O M M A !**

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, THE ONE SURE TRIGGER TO A DOWN-
and-out fight was to say something—anything—about some-
body's mother. As a matter of fact, we refined things,
eventually, to the point where you didn't have to get specific.
All you had to do was push into the face of another girl or boy
and, close as you could, almost nose to nose, just spit out the
two words: "Your mother!" This item of our code of honor
was not negotiable and, clearly, we took it pretty seriously:
even daring to refer to someone's mother put you off-limits.
From the time you learned how to talk, everybody's momma
remained the holiest of the holies. Yes, we were young. And a
lot of people probably thought we were hoodlums, or some-
thing like that. But we knew we were smart: we made and kept
ourselves ready to deal on those dangerous streets. Many of us,
there, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, were poor. But very few of us

This was a keynote address for the Williams College Conference on the Black Family
in February 1987.

were stupid. You couldn't be. In those days, as now, Black kids enjoyed damned little margin for error.

So we never lost track. We could feel it. We could see it. We could hear it. We could not deny it. And we did not ever forget it, this fact, that the first the last and the most, that the number one persevering, resourceful, resilient, and devoted person in our lives was, and would always be, your mother and my mother.

But sometimes, you know, we grow up without growing wise. Sometimes we become so sophisticated we have to read the *New York Times* in order to figure out whether it's a hot or a rainy day. We read the fine print in order to find out the names of our so-called leaders. We defer to erstwhile experts on the subject of sex. And we watch so much television that we can no longer tell the difference between a president who loves his—which is to say, *this*—country and a president who freely violates the Constitution. But what truly surprises me is Blackfolks listening to a whole lot of white blasphemy against Black feats of survival, Blackfolks paying attention to people who never even notice us except to describe us as “female-headed” or something equally weird. (I would like to know, for a fact, has anybody ever seen a female-headed anything at all? What did it look like? What did it do? Could you buy or marry one of them?) On the subject of language, let me briefly register my further unhappiness with the phrase “the feminization of poverty.” The millions of human beings that lamentable phrase hopes to describe will never agree that poverty is feminine or that they, themselves, participate in the invention of the tortures of poor women in America. Nor will impoverished Black women of America willingly submit to the flagrantly popular, illogical, and misogynist response suggesting that the solution to the impoverishment of Black women/Black mothers is the enablement of everybody else. We know that most Black children now live in Black families headed by Black women. And

we know that the most punishing poverty fastens itself to women, per se, and to Black women, always. I submit, therefore, that we also know, in our right minds, that Black women and Black mothers require specific, immediate, programmatic rescue! I mean, if somebody is suffering hunger, then it is she who needs the food.

Now, I am not opposed to sophistication, per se, but when you lose touch with your momma, when you take the word of an absolute, hostile stranger over and above the unarguable truth of your own miraculous, hard-won history, and when you don't remember to ask, again and again, “Compared to what?” I think you don't need to worry about enemies anymore. You better just worry for yourself.

Back in 1965, Daniel P. Moynihan issued a broadside insult to the National Black Community. With the full support of a Democratic administration that was tired of Negroes carrying on about citizenship rights, and integration, and white racist violence, Moynihan came through with the theory that we, Blackfolks, and that we, Black women, in particular, constituted “the problem.” It was not the failure of the United States federal and local governments to equally entitle and equally protect all of its citizens, but it was the failure of Black families to resemble the patriarchal setup of White America that explained our unequal, segregated, discriminated-against, and violently hated Black experience of nondemocracy, here. We were, he said, a problem. We were, he said, a pathological culture. Moynihan said these things while white patriarchal America was proving itself to the world in a needless savagery of resistance to our nationwide movement for justice, that's all: just justice.

And I wrote and published this little poem, for Mr. Moynihan, back then:

MEMO TO DANIEL PRETTY MOYNIHAN

You done what you done
I do what I can

Don't you liberate me
from my female black pathology
I been working off my knees
I been drinking what I please

And when I vine
I know I'm fine
I mean
All right for each and every
Friday night

But you been screwing me so long
I got a idea something's wrong
with you

I got a simple proposition
You take over my position

Clean your own house, babyface.

That's all he deserved, as I saw it. I couldn't take him seriously, and certainly not to *my* heart! Plus, I didn't have the time for Mr. Moynihan or any other Mr. Man's theories about me. I was busy. I was going to meetings. I was demonstrating outside Chock Full o' Nuts. I was going to work. I was raising my son. (Did that make me or my child or both of us a female-headed, whatchamacallit?) I had no time to waste.

And, besides, back then, you didn't bring your enemies into your house; you confronted them on the sidewalks, or in court, or on the floor of Congress. But when you went home, you went home to family. Of course, that meant that you had a family. It might not look like Dick and Jane or Ronald and Nancy but it surely did for you what the White House has never done for Black people: our family took care of us, and helped us to keep on keeping on. Our families might have adult women and children, and no adult men, or our families might

have one white parent and one Black parent, and their children, or our families might have three generations living in two rooms, or our families might have, and, back then, as now, the majority did have, a Black father and a Black mother and their children, but regardless, we were all there, for each other when we came home. And we, the people of this allegedly "pathological ghetto culture," we were waging the most principled, unassailable moral revolution of the twentieth century: we, the pathological community of Blackfolks were forcing these United States to finally honor the democratic promises responsible for the First American Revolution.

And, in the meantime, how was the dominant, the intact patriarchal white culture of America, how was the allegedly nonpathogenic but, nevertheless, racist and sexist culture of white America responding to this, the Civil Rights Revolution? By blowing up the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, September 15, 1963. By murdering four Black girls who had gone there for Sunday school. Or, in 1965, by murdering the unarmed white minister, Reverend James Reeb, in Selma. And, as well, in 1965, by publishing *The Moynihan Report*.

So, no, I didn't take him, or any of my enemies, to heart. But now there are Black voices joining the choruses of the absurd. There are national Black organizations and purported Black theoreticians who have become indistinguishable from verified enemies of Blackfolks in this country. These sophisticated Black voices jump to page one of the delighted, ultra-reliable *New York Times* because they are willing to be misinterpreted and to lament and defame the incredible triumph of Black women, the victory of Black mothers that is the victory of our continuation as a people in America. Archly delivering jargon phrases about "the collapse of Black family structure" and "the destructive culture of poverty in the ghetto" and, of course, "the crisis of female-headedness," with an additional screaming reference to "the shame of teenage pregnancy,"

these Black voices come to us as the disembodied blatherings of peculiar offspring: Black men and women who wish to deny the Black mother of their origins and who wish to adopt white Daniel P. Moynihan as their father. I happen to lack the imagination necessary to forgive, or understand, this phenomenon. But the possible consequences of this oddball public outcry demand our calm examination.

According to these new Black voices fathered by Mr. Moynihan, it would seem that the Black family subsists in a terrible, deteriorating state. That's the problem. The source for the problem is the Black Family (i.e., it's not White; it suffers from female-headedness). The solution to the Black Family Problem is, you guessed it, the Black Family. It must, itself, become more white—more patriarchal, less female-headed, more employed more steadily at better and better-paying jobs.

Okay?

Not okay. My own assessment of that analysis proceeds as follows:

Number One. The Black Family persists despite a terrible deteriorating state of affairs prevailing in these United States. This is a nation unwilling and progressively unable to provide for the well-being of most of its citizens: our economic system increasingly concentrates our national wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer interest groups. Our economic system increasingly augments the wealth of the richest sector of the citizenry while it diminishes the real wages and the available livelihood of the poor. Our economic system refuses responsibility for the equitable sharing of national services and monies among its various peoples. Our economic system maintains an unmistakable commitment to a Darwinian pseudophilosophy of *laissez-faire*. Our economic system remains insensitive to the political demands of a democracy and, therefore, our economic system does not yield to the requirements of equal entitlement vis-à-vis women, children, Black men, Hispanic Americans, Native

Americans, the elderly, and the disabled. If you total those American people you have an obvious majority of Americans squeezed outside the putative benefits of "free enterprise." Our economic system continues its building, trillion-dollar commitment *not* to the betterment of the lives of its citizens but, rather, to the development and lunatic replication of a military-industrial complex. In this context, then, the Black Family persists, yes, in a terrible deteriorating state. But we did not create this state. Nor do we control it. And we are not suffering "collapse." Change does not signify collapse. The nuclear, patriarchal family structure of White America was never our own; it was not *African*. And, when we arrived to slavery, here, why or how should we emulate the overseer and the master, we who amounted to three-fifths of a human being, we who could, by law, neither marry nor retain our children against the predation of the slave economy? Nonetheless, from under the whip through underpaid underemployment, and worse, Black folks have formulated our own family, our own home base for nurture and for pride. We have done this from extended kinship methods of taking care to teenagers thrilled, not appalled, by the prospect of a child: a Black child. We have loved our own inside a greater environment of systematized contempt.

And when America turned away from our Black men, when America chose to characterize our men as animals or rapists or shiftless or simpletons or, anyhow, and this was always the point, anyway, *unemployable*, when America rejected our fathers and brothers and sweethearts and sons when they came looking for work, and when America allowed big corporations like Chrysler and General Motors to skip town because they'd discovered a labor force even cheaper than Black men, we, Black women, kept things together, you know, not perfectly, but we did it/somebody had to keep things together and we didn't never skip town. We

didn't never say, "I'll be back. I'm going to the store," and then just disappear. And thank God, or else, who among us, Black, male or female, would be here today? And is this what all those sophisticated types mean when they gargle out the gobbledegook about "female-headedness"?

Number Two: To continue my assessment, I would agree that the Black family is not white. I do not agree that the problem is "female-headedness." I would rather suggest that the problem is that women, in general, and that Black women, in particular, cannot raise our children and secure an adequately paying job because this is a society that hates women and that thinks we are replaceable/we are dispensable, ridiculous, irksome facts of life aptly described as "female-headed," for example. American social and economic hatred of women means that any work primarily identified as women's work will be poorly paid, if at all. Any work open to women will be poorly paid, at best, in comparison to work open to men. Any work done by women will receive a maximum of 64 cents on the dollar compared to the same work done by men. Prenatal, well-baby care, day care for children, children's allowances, housing allowances for parents of children, paid maternity leave—all of the elemental provisions for the equally entitled citizenship of women, and of children, are ordinary attributes of industrialized nations, except for one: the United States.

The problem, clearly, does not originate with women, in general, or Black women, specifically, who, whether it's hard or whether it's virtually impossible, nevertheless keep things together. Our hardships follow from the uncivilized political and economic status enjoined upon women and children in our country, which has the highest infant mortality rate among its industrial peers. And, evidently, feels fine, thank you, about that. Not incidentally, Black infant mortality rates hold at levels twice that of whites.

Number Three. The bizarre tautological analysis of the

Black family that blames the Black family for being not white/not patriarchal not endowed with steadily employed Black husbands and fathers who enjoy access to middle-income occupations is just that: a heartless and bizarre tautology, a heartless joke. Supposing Black men and Black women *wanted* Black men to become patriarchs of their families, supposing Black men wanted to function as head of the house: shouldn't they probably have some kind of a job? And quite apart from quasi-patriarchal virtues or ambitions, shall anyone truly dare to suggest that the catastrophic 45 percent unemployment rate now crippling adult Black men is something that either Black men or Black women view as positive or desirable? Forty-five percent! What is the meaning of a man in the house if he cannot hold out his hand to help his family make it through the month, and if he cannot hold up his head with the pride and authority that regular, satisfying work for good pay provides? How or whom shall he marry and on what basis? Is it honestly puzzling to anyone that the forty-five percent Depression rate of unemployment that imprisons Black men almost exactly mirrors the forty-seven percent of Black households now headed up by Black women? Our Black families persist despite a racist arrangement of rewards such that a fully employed Black man or Black woman can hope to earn only 56 cents on the dollar as compared to the remuneration received by whites for equal work. And a Black college graduate, male or female, still cannot realistically expect to earn more than a white high school graduate.

We, children and parents of Black families, neither created nor do we control the terrible, deteriorating state of our unjust and meanly discriminating national affairs. In its structure, the traditional Black family has always reflected our particular jeopardy within these unwelcome circumstances. We have never been "standard" or predictable or stabilized in any normative sense even as our Black lives have never been standard

or predictable or stabilized inside a benign, nationwide environment. We have been flexible, ingenious, and innovative or we have perished. And we have not perished. We remain and we remain different, and we have become necessarily deft at distinguishing between the negative differences—those imposed upon us—and the positive differences—those that joyously attest to our distinctive, survivalist attributes as a people.

Today, we must distinguish between responsibility and consequence. We are not responsible for the systematic under- and unemployment of Black men or women. We are not responsible for the drastically unequal rewards of employment available to women and to Black adults and teenagers. We are not responsible for racist hatred of us, and we are not responsible for American contempt for women, *per se*. We are not responsible for a dominant value system that quibbles over welfare benefits for children and squanders deficit billions of dollars on American pie in the sky. But we must outlive the consequences of an inhumane, disposable-life ideology. We have no choice. And because our economic system and because our political system of support for that economy really do subscribe to a disposable-life ideology whenever the conflict appears to pit profit or dominant power against the freedoms of human beings, we no longer constitute a minority inside America. Perforce we have been joined in our precarious quandary, here, by women, and children, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans and the quickly expanding population of the aged, as well as the temporarily or permanently disabled.

At issue now is the "universal entitlement" as Ruth Sidel terms it in her important book *Women and Children Last*, of American citizens: What should American citizenship confer; what are the duties of the state in relation to the citizens it presumes to tax and to govern?

It is not the Black family in crisis but American democracy in crisis when the majority of our people oppose U.S. intervention

in Central America and, nevertheless, the president proceeds to intervene, albeit in circuitous and loony-tune fashion. And the bullets and the bombs falling out from such executive overriding of democratic representation will neither amuse nor merely make believe their unconscionable destruction inside Nicaragua. It is not the Black family in crisis but American democracy at stake when the majority of our people abhor South African apartheid and, nonetheless, the president proceeds to collaborate with the leadership of that evil up to the utmost of his ability to stay awake. It is not the Black family in crisis but American democracy at risk when a majority of American citizens may no longer assume the preservation and/or the development of social programs to let them stay alive and well.

But if we, Black children and parents, have been joined in our precarious quandary, here, may we not also now actively join with these other jeopardized Americans to redefine and to finally secure universal entitlement of citizenship that will at last conclude the shameful American history of our oppression? What should these universal entitlements include?

1. Guaranteed jobs and/or guaranteed income to assure each and every American in each and every one of the fifty states an existence *above* the poverty line.
2. Higher domestic minimum wages and, for the sake of our narrow and broadest self-interests, both, a coordinated, international minimum wage so that exhausted economic exploitation in Detroit can no longer be replaced by economic exploitation in Taiwan, or Soweto, or Manila.
3. Child allowances from the state as well as state guarantees of child support.
4. Equal pay for equal work.
5. Affirmative action to assure broadly democratic access to higher-paying occupations.
6. Compensation for "women's work" equal to compensation for "men's work."

7. Housing allowances and/or state commitments to build and/or to subsidize acceptable, safe, and affordable housing for every citizen.
8. Comprehensive, national health insurance from prenatal through geriatric care.
9. State education, and perpetual reeducation, available through graduate levels of study on the basis of student interest and aptitude rather than financial capacity.
10. A national budget that will invariably commit the main portion of our collective monies to our collective domestic needs for a good life.
11. Comprehensive provision for the well-being of all of our children commensurate with the kind of future we are hoping to help to construct. These provisions must include paid maternity/paternity leave and universal, state-controlled child-care public programs for working parents.
12. Nationalization of vital industries to protect citizen consumers and citizen workers, alike, from the greed-driven vagaries of a "free market."
13. Aggressive nuclear disarmament polices and, concurrently, aggressive state protection of what's left of the life-supportive elements of our global environment.

I do not believe that a just, a civilized nation can properly regard any one of these thirteen entitlements as optional. And yet, not one of them is legally in place. And, as these rudimentary aspects of democratic entitlement exist nowhere on our American landscape today, and as Black women and Black men have been historically targeted for the worst social and economic forms of American rejection, is there any reason—any *reason*—for surprise that we may in our Black American daily attempts to keep going evince so many signs of enormous, arduous strain? Who is surprised? And why do we tolerate these expert yammerings/these insufferable accusa-

tions of Black family breakdown/Black *moral* breakdown? Black breakdown compared to what?

In the current American context that produces such stunning overall statistics as these—two out of every three officially poor Americans are women and one out of every two marriages ends in divorce—it seems to me that we, Blackfolks, are holding up rather well!

And in the current American atmosphere of moral leadership provided by Ronald Reagan, our American president who grievously breaks international and national law and then regularly lies about those crimes or, better yet, just *forgets* about them—in this atmosphere, who shall presume to say *what* to the domestic victims of this, our executive criminal? We need rescue from his crimes! We do not need the cruel absurdity of patronizing criticism precisely because our beleaguered lives expose the inhumane consequences of Ronald Reagan's complete code of national dishonor! Since his accession to the presidency, is there *any* federal program for domestic life-support that has not come under his personal, his unpardonable, attack?

And what about teenage pregnancy which, like divorce, has moved forward into critical, destabilizing areas of contemporary dynamics? I say there is nothing inherently bad about young people wanting to become mothers or fathers. There is nothing specifically Black about it, either, or white. It's happening, now, with greater frequency than the teenagers themselves, or the rest of us, can readily accommodate in a civilized, supportive, nondestructive manner. And that's because extremely few Americans apparently know how to successfully mother or father, anyway, and, also, our government is not in the habit of trying to be helpful to new parents, whether they are thirty-five years old or seventeen. As a matter of fact, American adults stutter so hypocritically about teenage preg-

nancies that we on the one hand claim to be upset but then we still can't get it together to guarantee appropriate, universal sex education in our public schools, and universal teenage access to contraceptive means, including abortion, if necessary. I note that, actually, teenage pregnancy rates have declined by 10 percent during the decade from 1973 to 1983. And I note that, notwithstanding that fact, the alarm continues, hysterical and, again, misbegotten in its aim. Before anybody presumes to condemn or to take away the children of our children, we need to confront these questions. Who will instinctively respect a Black boy or a young Black girl? Who needs them? Who cannot live without them? Who else will welcome, without ambivalence, the advent of another Black child besides a Black child, herself, or himself? Who among us is prepared to answer any of those questions with a dedicated programmatic evidence of sincerity? First, it seems to me, we would need to eliminate the reality of 50 percent *plus* unemployment that has taunted young Black men and women for more than ten years in America. And, second, we would need to eliminate the institutionalized educational failure that a 40 to 75 percent high school dropout rate among Black teenagers reveals. Are we ready to do that? Listen to this silence!

Compared to the uncertain, but essential, top-to-bottom, male and female, White and Black, childhood-to-elderly tough coalitional work ahead of us, the revolutionary work that will establish those thirteen universal entitlements as our new American Bill of Rights, compared to that stupendous but unavoidable, that emergency undertaking, wouldn't it be fun, instead, to duck into an old movie? You know, that old flick about the Negro Problem or is it the Crisis of the Black Family, or will it be that favorite midnight horror show about "female-headed" monstrosities that catapult an entire people into a cauldron of low-income misery and sloth? Well, go ahead, and

good luck inside the movies, and even more good luck to you when you come out again!

In *The State of Black America, 1986*, published by the National Urban League, you will discover these rather tasty morsels of new information:

In most discussions of the recent growth in female-headed families, one fact is invariably omitted—that the largest increases occurred among "middle class" and not "underclass" families. Nine out of every 10 (88%) black female-headed families formed between 1970 and 1981 were headed by women with at least a high school diploma while one out of three were college educated. Contrary to popular belief, only 12% of the increase in one-parent black families over this period was due to families headed by women who were high school dropouts.

Similarly, 95% of the one-parent black families formed between 1970 and 1981 were headed by women who had been formerly married . . . only 5% of the rise in black one-parent families during the 1970's occurred among women who had never married. Similar findings result for female-headed families among whites as well. In short, the largest increases in one-parent families . . . occurred among the black and white middle class—primarily because of spiraling divorce rates over the past two decades. Thus, there is less and less empirical support for the popular view that female-headed families are an intrinsic characteristic of a "culture of poverty."

A couple of pages later we read,

. . . Black youth from one-parent families are about as likely to attend college as are youth from two-parent families. While 13% of children in two-parent families were in college in 1979, so were 10% of the children in one-parent black families. Similarly, among black families with incomes of \$20,000 and over, youth in two-parent families were about as likely to attend college (20%) as youth in one-parent black families (23%).

But all of these numbers and percentile comparisons don't do too much for ghetto culture products like myself. I mean all

that's useful. And I'm mighty glad to find out that the—what do they call that stuff? empirical data?—move right along in synch with my own head and my own heart. But I personally do not need any of these supersophisticated charts and magical graphs to tell me my own momma done better than she could and my momma's momma, *she* done better than I could. And *everybody's momma* done better than anybody had any right to expect she would. And that's the truth!

And I hope you've been able to follow my meaning. And a word to the wise, they say, should be sufficient. So, I'm asking you real nice: Don't you talk about my momma.

PARK SLOPE: MIXING IT UP FOR GOOD

O I see flashing that this America is only you and me . . .
Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me,
Past, present, future, are you and me.
I dare not shirk any part of myself. . . .

—Walt Whitman, from "By Blue Ontario's Shore"

SOUNDTRACK, THE SOPHISTICATED, BUSTLING MUSIC STORE that Tommy Spennato opened eight years ago on Park Slope's main drag, Seventh Avenue, confronts would-be consumers with a dazzling catholicity of albums, CDs, and cassettes in orderly bins and on display. From classical to reggae, from heavy jazz to Kool and the Gang or Ethel Waters or Milton Nascimento or UB40, it's all there because, for Spennato's customers, it's all popular music: Park Slope is a popular, a democratic neighborhood, as mixed-up, or as cosmopolitan, as an inventory of Spennato's musical stock would readily suggest.

This mix is what the thirty-eight-year-old proprietor loves.

This essay was originally published in the *New York Times* on November 20, 1988.