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**The Early Developments of Black Women's Studies  
in the Lives of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde**

**Los primeros desarrollos en los estudios de las mujeres Afrodescendientes en las vidas de Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan y Audre Lorde**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the pedagogical foundations of three U.S. Black women writers—Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde—widely recognized as among the most influential and prolific writers of 20th century cultures of emancipation. Their distinct yet entwined legacies—as socialist feminists, people's poets

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and novelists, community organizers, and innovative educators—altered the landscapes of multiple liberation movements from the late 1960s to the present, and offer a striking example of the possibilities of radical women’s intellectual friendships. The internationalist reverberations of Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde are alive and ubiquitous, even if to some readers today in the Caribbean and Latin America, their names may be unfamiliar.<sup>1</sup>

Bambara’s fiction centered Black and Third World<sup>2</sup> women and children absorbing vibrant life lessons within societies structured to harm them. Her 1980 novel, *The Salt Eaters*, posed the question - “are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” -to conjoin healing and resistance for a new embattled generation under President Reagan’s neoliberal shock doctrines that were felt worldwide. June Jordan’s salvos of essays, fiction, and poetry -including *Things That I Do in the Dark*, *On Call*, and *Affirmative Acts* - intervened in struggles around Black English, community control, police violence, sexual assault, and youth empowerment. Audre Lorde’s words are suffused across U.S. movements (and, increasingly, in the Caribbean and Latin America)- on signs, shirts, and memes, at #BlackLivesMatter and International Women’s Strike marches. Your silence will not protect you. The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. Revolution is not a one-time event. However, her voluminous legacy may risk becoming a series of slogans, “the Audre Lorde that reads like a bumper sticker.”<sup>3</sup>

**keywords:** african american politics; education; black feminism; healing politics

## RESUMEN

*Este artículo explora los fundamentos pedagógicos de tres escritoras negras estadounidenses: Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan y Audre Lorde, ampliamente reconocidas entre las escritoras más influyentes y*

<sup>1</sup> Some noteworthy recent translations and works on Lorde by contemporary Caribbean, Latin American, and Iberian feminists include: Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* in Spanish, <https://issuu.com/bollosenteoria/docs/audre-lorde-la-hermana-la-extranjer>. Bouteldja, Houria; “¿Feministas o no? Pensar la posibilidad de un «feminismo decolonial» con James Baldwin y Audre Lorde;” in *Tabula Rasa*; Nº 21; Bogotá; 2014: <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/tara/n21/n21a04.pdf>. Jiménez Vidiella, Georgina; “Audre Lorde y los Encuentros en la casa de la diferencia - Entrevista a la investigadora feminista Georgina Jiménez Vidiella”; 2017: <http://www.contratiempohistoria.org/?p=6353>. Limonta, Norma R. Guillard; “To Be a Black Woman, a Lesbian, and an Afro-Feminist in Cuba Today;” in *Black Diaspora Review*; V. 5, Nº 2; Bloomington; 2016: <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/bdr/article/download/21034/27096>. Paredes, Julieta; “Despatriarcalización;” in *Revista de Estudios Bolivianos*; V. 21; Pittsburgh; 2015: <https://bsj.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/bsj/article/download/144/919>. Viveros Vigoya, Mara, and Carmen Gregorio Gil, “Presentación,” in *Revista de Estudios Sociales* #49; Bogotá; 2015: [https://issuu.com/publicacionesfaciso/docs/revista\\_estudios\\_sociales\\_n\\_49](https://issuu.com/publicacionesfaciso/docs/revista_estudios_sociales_n_49). The works of Toni Cade Bambara and June Jordan have yet to be similarly engaged in Spanish. Warm gratitude to Ximena Garcia Bustamante, Tatiana Cozzarelli, Yasmina Dardari, Susana Draper, Elena Chavez Goycochea, Michele Hardesty, Sugeily Rodríguez Lebrón, kara lynch, Natalie Matos, and Jimena Vergara for some of these reading suggestions and ongoing dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike its current designation as a geopolitical region of impoverished powerlessness, the term “Third World” described during the 1950s to 1970s a transnational wave of decolonization and national liberation struggles, nonalignment with European/Soviet Union/U.S. imperial powers, and positive identification with revolutionary movements in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, indigenous territories, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands. See Prashad, Vijay; *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World*; New Press; New York; 2007. Prashad, Vijay; *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*; Verso Books; New York; 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, Nick; “On Audre Lorde’s Legacy and the ‘Self’ of Self-Care, Part 1 of 3;” *Low End Theory*; February 18, 2013: <http://www.lowendtheory.org/post/43457761324/on-audre-lordes-legacy-and-the-self-of>.



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*prolíficas de las culturas de emancipación del siglo XX. Sus legados, distintos pero entrelazados -como feministas socialistas, poetas y novelistas populares, activistas comunitarias y educadoras innovadoras-, alteraron los paisajes de diversos movimientos de liberación desde fines de la década de 1960 hasta el presente, y ofrecen un ejemplo sorprendente de las posibilidades que generan las amistades intelectuales entre mujeres políticamente radicales. Las reverberaciones internacionalistas de Bambara, Jordan y Lorde están vivas y omnipresentes, aunque para algunos lectores caribeños y latinoamericanos de hoy sus nombres pueden sonar desconocidos.*

*La ficción de Bambara se centró en las mujeres y niños negros y del Tercer Mundo, absorbiendo importantes lecciones de vida al interior de sociedades estructuradas para dañarlos. Su novela de 1980, *The Salt Eaters*, planteó la pregunta "¿Estás seguro, cariño, de que quieres estar bien?" para unir sanación y resistencia en una nueva generación asediada por las doctrinas de shock neoliberal del presidente Reagan padecidas por todo el mundo. El conjunto de ensayos, ficción y poesía de Jordan, incluyendo *Things That I Do in the Dark*, *On Call* y *Affirmative Acts*, intervinieron en luchas en torno al inglés negro, el control comunitario, la violencia policial, la violencia sexual y el empoderamiento de los jóvenes. Las palabras de Audre Lorde se difunden en todos los movimientos de EE.UU. (y, cada vez más, en el Caribe y América Latina), en afiches, remeras y memes, en las marchas de #BlackLivesMatter y en la Huelga Internacional de Mujeres: "Tu silencio no te protegerá", "Las herramientas del amo nunca desmantelarán la casa del amo", "La revolución no es un evento de una sola vez". Sin embargo, su voluminoso legado puede correr el riesgo de convertirse en una serie de consignas, "la Audre Lorde que se lee como una calcomanía en un auto"*

**Palabras clave:** política afroamericana; educación; feminismo negro; políticas del cuidado

Returning to a vital early period of their work, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, during which Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde taught writing and literature to Black and Puerto Rican students in the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Program at the City University of New York, can help clarify and augment their later life trajectories. During this pivotal period in their personal and political growth, Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde immersed themselves in the formation of Black, Puerto Rican, and Women's Studies at the City College of New York, and for Lorde, at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.<sup>4</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> This history has recently become re-animated with the 2018 publications of their teaching archives from this period. See Bambara, Toni Cade; *Realizing the Dream of a Black University & Other Writings (Parts I-II)*; co-edited by Makeba Lavan and Conor Tomás Reed; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018. Jordan, June; *Life Studies, 1966-1976*; co-edited by Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018. Lorde, Audre; *I teach myself in outline, Notes, Journals, Syllabi, & an Excerpt from Deotha*; co-edited by Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018. Also see Rich, Adrienne; *What We Are Part Of: Teaching at CUNY, 1968-1974 (Parts I-II)*; co-edited by Iemanjá Brown, Stefania Heim, Erica Kaufman, Kristin Moriah, Conor Tomás Reed, Talia Shalev, and Wendy Tronrud; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 4*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2014.



article places Bambara's campus newspaper editorials alongside Jordan's housing research and public speeches, a long-unpublished work by Lorde entitled *Deotha*, and the three women's classroom materials and open letters to colleagues and administrators, to name a few primary sources explored below.

Reading across the *coalitions* of these textual materials and political events, as well as across individual and collective *writing composition* and *movement composition*, we can recover the roles of Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde as strategic Black women scholars who intervened in the formation of Black Women's Studies.<sup>5</sup> These archives chronicle their dynamic emergent pedagogies that brought feminist "consciousness-raising sessions" into New York City classrooms; the archives also illuminate more intricate context to the public writings that Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde wrote within and after this period. Instead of hewing to simplified identificatory lines, they contributed to the formation of *intersectionality*, a strategic position affirming that we must bridge movements for women's liberation, Black and Brown liberation, LGBTQI liberation, and working-class liberation, by rooting ourselves in our own lived experiences in order to better organize across our differences.<sup>6</sup> Through this material excavation of their day-to-day teaching lives, we can measure these Black radical feminists' theoretical interventions in the larger Left, formed through a compositional praxis with working-class Black and Puerto Rican students who had been previously excluded from the largest U.S. public urban university.

Through their energies within larger movements, these women contributed to transforming CUNY and propelling education reforms across the country in a time of vast urban upheavals, although this work by them has until now been largely unsung. Ultimately, I wish to reclaim the significance of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde as radical educators, whose freedom dreams energized their lucid

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<sup>5</sup> By framing these educators' full realms of pedagogical and political activity in *compositional* terms, this essay entwines the processes of reading, writing, interpersonal relationships, and liberation strategies similar to how 1960s-70s Italian Marxists advanced *class composition* as a "conceptual tool for understanding the process whereby the working class is composed, decomposed, and recomposed." See Palazzo, David P.; *The "Social Factory" in Postwar Italian Radical Thought from Operismo to Autonomia* (diss.); CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2014; p. 125. Also see Wright, Steve; *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomous Marxism*; Pluto Press; London; 2002.

<sup>6</sup> While "intersectionality" has come to be recognized more as an academic term in the critical race theory discipline that emerged in the mid-1980s, its roots and usage precede that with the groundings of African, Asian, Black, Caribbean, Chicana, first nations, Jewish, Latina, and Pacific Islander feminist and lesbian feminist organizing and writing. See work by Ama Ata Aidoo, Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Cade Bambara, Frances Beal, Grace Lee Boggs, *Chrysalis* journal, Michelle Cliff, Patricia Hill Collins, Combahee River Collective, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Judy Grahn, Fannie Lou Hamer, bell hooks, Claudia Jones, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez, Cherríe Moraga, *off our backs* newspaper, Tillie Olsen, Pat Parker, Adrienne Rich, Ricky Sherover-Marcuse, *Triple Jeopardy* newspaper, Sojourner Truth, and Alice Walker.



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critiques of CUNY's late 1960–early 1970s de facto segregationism, neoliberal restructuring, and racialized attacks on school admissions that so presciently defined the battle lines of higher education that still persist today.

### Bringing Community Learning to College

Born in 1939, Toni Cade Bambara saw Langston Hughes give presentations to children at the local library, received street smarts from elder women who looked after her, and stoked her social curiosities through an open-door policy for many apartment buildings and local shops. She acted as a “community scribe” for adults by drafting verbal agreements and meeting minutes for neighborhood organizers, running tips to local journalists, and transcribing letters to loved ones.<sup>7</sup> This responsibility to document, interpret, and serve a collectivity would ethically anchor her writing approach for decades. Bambara's intimate and first-hand knowledge of these studies-on-the-streets, and her mentorship in youth by “insubordinates, dissidents, iconoclasts, oppositionists, change agents, radicals, and revolutionaries” propelled the formation of her later activist community and City University pedagogical efforts.<sup>8</sup> Her attention to these multi-ethnic dimensions of Harlem helped shape her aims to create studies that related Black people's histories to their neighbors and co-workers also struggling against institutional and interpersonal racism in the United States in a more global anti-colonial context.

June Jordan's immersive radical pedagogy was also formed during these early 1960s years in New York City, where she was born in Harlem in 1936 and raised in Brooklyn. In early 1960s Harlem, she regularly conversed with Louis Lomax, Malcolm X, reporters with *Amsterdam News*, and members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Jordan also documented the July 1964 Harlem riots firsthand from the street-level perspective of its residents occupied under police forces.<sup>9</sup> Her early writings show an engagement with the themes of housing, urban conditions, and youth that served as prisms of social inequities in much Black and Puerto Rican literature of the post-World War II period.<sup>10</sup> In 1966, as debates mounted over the continued

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<sup>7</sup> Bambara, Toni Cade; *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*; Vintage; New York; 1999; p. 218. See also Holmes, Linda Janet; *A Joyous Revolt: Toni Cade Bambara, Writer and Activist*; Praeger; Santa Barbara; 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Jordan, June; “Letter to Michael (1964);” in *Civil Wars*; Touchstone Books; New York; 1995; p. 16-22.

<sup>10</sup> See, for examples, Petry, Ann; *The Street*; 1946. Marshall, Frank; *47th Street*; 1948. Ellison, Ralph; *Invisible Man*; 1952. Hughes, Langston; “Ballad of a Landlord;” 1957. Hansberry, Lorraine; *Raisin in the Sun*; 1959. Thomas, Piri; *Down These Mean*



racial-economic segregation of New York City's public schools and neighborhoods, Jordan began to work with the community-action program Mobilization for Youth on housing conditions in the Lower East Side and around the city.<sup>11</sup> Jordan focused on the structural and quotidian aspects of multi-ethnic lives—particularly Black and Puerto Rican—inside housing projects and perpetually underdeveloped neighborhoods, as well as possibilities for improving their social conditions. Beginning in Autumn 1967, Jordan began to work for the Teachers & Writers Collaborative program “The Voice of the Children,” which gathered over a dozen Black and Puerto Rican teenagers each weekend to read and write poems and newsletters, listen to music, and make field trips.<sup>12</sup> Jordan saw her advocacy for young poets as a counterforce to public schools’ denigration of their lives, and especially the lives of the Black and Puerto Rican students she taught in her weekend workshops and at City College.

Born in 1934, Audre Lorde’s long relationship to poetry began in her youth, when she recited poems as a way to convey her feelings. In adulthood, after working as a nurse’s aide, factory worker, social worker, and librarian, Lorde was awarded in 1968 a National Endowment for the Arts teaching residency at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. Here she taught poetry for the first time with Black students who had been involved in desegregation protests and were eager for creative outlets. In this first experience teaching, Lorde directly confronted the limits of how her Blackness, gender, and sexuality was perceived by others with whom she shared a learning space, struggling to reveal her bi-ethnic marriage that was, by this time, falling apart. Upon returning to NYC, Lorde was invited by SEEK director Mina Shaughnessy to teach at City College, after Lorde’s friend and City College student Yolanda Rios shared *First Cities* with Shaughnessy.<sup>13</sup>

Bambara began to teach in 1965 at the age of twenty-six in City College’s Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program, after receiving her Master’s degree there. In 1967, Jordan joined SEEK at the age of thirty-one, and a year later Lorde also began to teach in the program at the age of thirty-

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*Streets*; 1967. Brooks, Gwendolyn; *In the Mecca*; 1968. Sanchez, Sonia; *The Bronx is Next*; 1968. Pietri, Pedro; “Puerto Rican Obituary;” 1969. Watts Prophets; “Tenements;” 1971. Also see various works by Julia de Burgos and Victor Hernández Cruz.

<sup>11</sup> “Mobilization for Youth was the first Great Society agency. It opened in 1962 on New York’s Lower East Side, the precursor of seventeen such agencies established in sixteen major cities in the early 1960s with federal anti-delinquency money... To most the adults on the Lower East Side, MFY was symbolized by its store-front service centers, to which residents were encouraged to bring their daily problems of living under the welfare state.” Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard Cloward; *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*; Vintage; New York; 1972; p. 290.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, June; “The Voice of the Children (1967),” in *Civil Wars*; Touchstone Books; New York; 1995.

<sup>13</sup>De Veaux, Alexis; *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*; W.W. Norton and Company; New York; 2006; p. 101.



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four. This inner-city and then-free public college was an unusual institution. In the 1930s, the “citadel on a hill,” as it was called—with gothic buildings that towered atop a sloping incline along Harlem’s west side—concentrated poor radical European immigrant mostly-male students and teachers committed to anti-racism, anti-fascism, and thriving intellectual debate. Over time, campus life drifted away from being a hotbed of social dissent, even as its admissions practices continued to welcome predominantly poor Irish, Italian, and Jewish students. Fellow SEEK educator Barbara Christian noted at the time, “There City College sits, smack dab in the middle of the largest Black community in the country, and only 9% of its daytime students are Black or Puerto Rican,” and five of that nine percent “came through the SEEK program.”<sup>14</sup> This educational access pilot project—created at City College in 1965, and then extended through community pressure to all CUNY senior colleges in 1967—prepared Black and Puerto Rican high-school students for college studies with preparatory courses, study stipends, and social-work counseling.<sup>15</sup> Within a few years, SEEK would become a nucleus for counteracting the institutional inequalities entrenched in City College’s admissions, curriculum, value systems, and relationship to the surrounding Harlem area. Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde worked with such educator-writers as Aijaz Ahmad, Paul Blackburn, Christian, Addison Gayle, David Henderson, Raymond Patterson, Adrienne Rich, and Mina Shaughnessy.

City College life at this time seethed with equal parts excitement, turmoil, and uncertainty. The Black and Puerto Rican SEEK student population, although tiny, was tremendously active: students invited revolutionaries to speak on campus, screened films like Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*, initiated radical clubs like the Onyx Society and Puerto Ricans Involved in Student Action (PRISA), published pamphlets and newspapers, and collaborated with left-wing faculty and Euro-American students in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In October 1968, Black Panther Minister of Justice H. Rap Brown, sociologist Harry Edwards, and athlete John Carlos spoke at the school in defense of Carlos and Tommie Smith’s Black power fist salute at the Mexico City Olympics, a gesture that had come in the wake of mass protests in Mexico City following the massacre of students at Tlatelolco.<sup>16</sup> In November, anti-war students temporarily granted sanctuary on campus an AWOL U.S. soldier, an action for which 170 students and community

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<sup>14</sup> Biondi, Martha; *The Black Revolution on Campus*; University of California Press; Berkeley; 2014; p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> “SEEK & College Discovery;” *CUNY History & Mission*; <http://www2.cuny.edu/academics/academic-programs/seek-college-discovery/history>.

<sup>16</sup> *Tech News*; City College of New York; New York; October 30, 1968.



members were arrested.<sup>17</sup> And in December, Black Panther Prime Minister Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) spoke there to a massive crowd from around CUNY and New York City on a “blueprint for armed struggle against American racism and capitalism.”<sup>18</sup> In the political tradition of City College circa the 1930s, these Black and Puerto Rican students, with Euro-American student comrades, created a radical intellectual milieu where people could relate experiential lessons from the colonial wars in Algeria, Vietnam, and elsewhere around the world to their own local conditions and concerns.

This caliber of dialogues also took shape and flourished inside SEEK classrooms. The students, teachers, and staff interwove creative learning practices with political analyses about the segregated campus and simmering community issues to develop a concrete model for institutional change in higher education from below. As one of the first SEEK educators, Bambara was seen as a militant yet approachable, young yet seasoned, faculty member by her colleagues and increasingly radicalizing students who prepared the grounds for intensifying campus protests. Meanwhile, Jordan brought to the bustling campus milieu a thorough understanding of urban policies, social aid programs, and neighborhood rebellions in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Lower East Side. Lorde soon entered with a radical pedagogy that jettisoned the distance usually imposed by an assumed teaching expertise, as she reveled in learning about composition alongside her students. She recalls, “I’d come into class and say, ‘Guess what I found out last night. Tenses are a way of ordering the chaos around time.’ I learned that grammar was not arbitrary... that it could be freeing as well as restrictive.”<sup>19</sup> The generous sensitivity and encouragement between these Black women educators and their students demonstrate how their pedagogies were animated by emotional support as well as academic rigor. Jordan later recalled, “It was quite amazing. We didn’t think of it as amazing. Everybody was just there and we thought that if we could make democracy come to City College that probably we could have an impact on the concept and perhaps even the practice of public education through the country.”<sup>20</sup>

During this initial period of SEEK’s maturation, Bambara insisted on a form of mentorship and cooperative spirit that was no-bullshit, strategic, receptive, and jocular. Through departmental reports, newspaper articles, and public letters to students, Bambara elevated the stakes of learning and expanded

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<sup>17</sup> *The Campus*; City College of New York; New York; November 14, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> Opie, Frederick Douglass; “Developing Their Minds Without Losing Their Soul: Black and Latino Student Coalition-Building in New York, 1965–1969;” in *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*; V. 33, N° 2; Buffalo; 2009; p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> Lorde, Audre; “An Interview: Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde;” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*; Crossing Press; New York; 2007; p. 94-95.

<sup>20</sup> Jordan, June, and Peter Erickson; “After Identity;” in *Transition*; V. 63; Cambridge; 1994; p. 141.





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avenues of intellectual struggles, planting the seeds for a much longer inter-generational project of political consciousness and social liberation. This approach is seen in a report on a summer 1968 SEEK seminar that Bambara facilitated, in which students collectively chose the course theme: “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Liberation.” She describes the stakes of the weekly lessons in stark terms of survival and symbiotic co-education:

These were not students boning up for some exam or other, or feverishly taking notes that would guarantee a spotlight in an upcoming course... These were students painfully aware of the gaps in their education, frantically alert to their need to establish a viable position, a stance in what is for them a daily toe to toe battle with the uglier elements of this country. It was, then, a course with few limits, no specific end, personal, often agonizing—without a doubt the most difficult kind of course to “teach” for there can be no “control” in the usual pedagogic sense, and without a doubt the most worthwhile kind of educational adventure for it lends itself so easily to two-way learning.<sup>21</sup>

Bambara and her SEEK colleagues modeled an anti-authoritarian position as teachers with “very little academic distance” from their students, which provided the interpretive space to explore their curiosities and make demands upon higher education together. In closing her summer report, Bambara weighs the significance of SEEK students’ interest in autonomous “experimental college” projects such as the Free Universities and Liberation Schools that appeared alongside, or at times even within and against, formal universities. She anticipates that these immediate forms of counter-education “now taking place in universities all over the world” can clarify the students’ visions for alternative learning inside the belly of the beast. After all, to “establish a ‘real’ college within the mock college” could upend the legitimacy of the pre-existing college structure itself.<sup>22</sup>

At the start of the Spring 1969 semester, as students and faculty began to propose structural changes in admissions, curricula, and campus / community control, they opposed the deep-seated intransigence of City College’s administration and more reactionary faculty with protests and public writing.

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<sup>21</sup> Bambara, Toni Cade; *“Realizing the Dream of a Black University” & Other Writings (Part II)*; co-edited by Makeba Lavan and Conor Tomás Reed; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9, 12.



The SEEK program served more acutely as a reciprocal incubator for student and faculty radicalization. This vision and practice culminate in Bambara's essay "Realizing the Dream of a Black University," first published in the February 1969 issue of the campus newspaper *Observation Post*—two months before the April 1969 student strike. In this under-recognized early declaration and blueprint for Black/women's studies, Bambara portends of the campus environment, "an explosion is imminent," advocating for City College, Harlem, and New York City to combine forces to change the college.<sup>23</sup>

Bambara assails: "A brief glance at the bulletin will reveal that the English Department is still dipping out of the old Anglo-Saxon bag... The infusion of one or two Black literature courses in their curricula does nothing at all to the deeply entrenched notion that Anglo-Saxon literature is THE LITERATURE." To construct and disseminate an alternative vision, Bambara outlines a broad curriculum on American Justice and the Afro-American, Negritude, Trends in Western Thought, Psychology and Blacks, Eastern Ethics Through Literature, Revolution, and Root Courses. She identifies clear policy and institutional reforms to be made, such as the formation of a "Skills Bank":

The Center would tap the resources in our community and use as instructors those grandmothers, those on the corner hardheads, those students, those instructors, whoever happens to have the knowledge and expertise we desire, regardless of the number of or absence of degrees, publications, titles, honors.

We have already in our student body and on our staff at the College and in SEEK people who know how to teach instruments, dance, lay out magazines, operate radio stations or restaurants, dismantle cars, take over TV stations, read newspapers for slant, handle landlords and cops, organize committees, set up conferences. The Center should begin then, to set up a network of communications so that one person desiring to set up a course in Caribbean cookery, let's say, could be put in touch with chefs, caterers, linguists, anthropologists, etc.<sup>24</sup>

In doing so, she passionately argues for students, faculty, staff, and community members to transform various studies *now* with what they already have *now*, instead of deferring to an imagined future standoff with distant administrators. Even if the students weren't able to implement her suggestions at that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 21-22.



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moment, the seeds had been planted. For Bambara, a “Black University” entailed a more expansive intellectual project than simply adding Black students, teachers, and courses. It meant upending disciplinary/racialized/gendered silos, identifying knowledge credentials outside of the academy, and creating a partisan liberatory relationship to collective studies.

### Teaching with the Strike

On a wider scale, the state budget under Governor Nelson Rockefeller called for slashing the SEEK program’s funding, while imposing a twenty-percent reduction of CUNY admissions overall. In response, Black and Puerto Rican students led a petition campaign to pressure then-City College President Buell Gallagher to implement changes in admissions, faculty hiring, and curricula, using student newspapers to publicly debate the issues. Students forged a list of demands to the administration:

- A school of Black and Puerto Rican Studies.
- A first-year orientation for Black and Puerto Rican students.
- That the SEEK students have a determining voice in the setting of guidelines for the SEEK Program, including the hiring and firing of SEEK personnel.
- That the racial composition of the entering first-year class be reflective of the New York City high school population.
- That all education majors be required to take Black and Puerto Rican history and the Spanish language.<sup>25</sup>

An April 1969 act of student, teacher, staff, and community *composition* would accelerate and expand SEEK’s mission, and indelibly alter the course of CUNY at large and public higher education nationwide. On April 22, a student-led campus occupation shut down official business, and simultaneously constructed Harlem University for two weeks. Neighborhood residents, students of all ages, and various speakers came to the inaugural open-house event, including Betty Shabazz, Kathleen Cleaver, James Foreman, Emory Douglas, H. Rap Brown, and Adam Clayton Powell, who deemed the action “one of the greatest test events” in the history of Black education. This free college suddenly under neighborhood control hosted a walk-in clinic, tutorials, nightly community meetings, as well as a “free breakfast program

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<sup>25</sup>Black and Puerto Rican Student Community (BPRSC); “Five Demands;” in *CUNY Digital History Archive*; <http://cdha.cuny.edu/items/show/6952>.



for the children in the neighborhood, day care, [and] political education classes.”<sup>26</sup> Campus buildings were renamed after Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Pedro Albizu Campos, Marcus Garvey, Mao Tse-Tung, and Patrice Lumumba.<sup>27</sup> Twenty-five Harlemite parents brought “big pots of rice and beans and pork and pasteles,” and the Lower East Side dispatched “a hundred parents to hold the gates.”<sup>28</sup>

The SEEK program’s educators greatly sympathized with the strike, which was led by many of their students. Jordan notes of this time, “In every sense, from faculty petitions to student manifestoes, to the atmosphere in the cafeteria and the bathrooms, City College signified a revolution in progress. Nobody was eating, sleeping, thinking, or moving around anything except the issues at stake.”<sup>29</sup> Lorde came out every day to Harlem University’s annex at I.S. 201, where City College classes were relocated during the strike.<sup>30</sup> However, a later account reveals her attempts as a Black lesbian to nourish an expanding strike that was not altogether laudable or keen to transform gender and sexuality roles within Black and Puerto Rican communities:

“When Yoli [Yolanda Rios] and I cooked curried chicken and beans and rice and took our extra blankets and pillows up the hill to the striking students occupying buildings at City College in 1969, demanding open admissions and the right to an education, I was a Black Lesbian. When I walked through the midnight hallways of Lehman College that same year, carrying Midol and Kotex pads for the young Black radical women taking part in the action, and we tried to persuade them that their place in the revolution was not ten paces behind Black men, that spreading their legs to the guys on the tables in the cafeteria was not a revolutionary act no matter what the brothers said, I was a Black Lesbian.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jiménez, Lillian; “Puerto Ricans and Educational Civil Rights: A History of the 1969 City College Takeover,” in *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*; V. 21, N° 2; New York; 2009; p. 165. Also see Ferguson, Roderick A.; *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis; 2012; p. 76–77.

<sup>27</sup>Sasmor, Ken, and Tom Foty; “It May Not Be the Place You Knew;” *The Campus*; City College of New York; New York; May 6, 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Jiménez, Lillian; “Puerto Ricans and Educational Civil Rights: A History of the 1969 City College Takeover,” in *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*; V. 21, N° 2; New York; 2009; p. 170.

<sup>29</sup> Jordan, June; “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person;” in *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays*; Virago Press; London; 1989; p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> De Veaux, Alexis; *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*; W.W. Norton and Company; New York; 2006; p. 106.

<sup>31</sup>Lorde, Audre; “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities,” in *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*; Oxford University Press; Oxford; 2009; p. 60.



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These snapshots by Jordan and Lorde exposes several contradictions within this incendiary moment—deeply ingrained institutional metrics that refused to value students of colors’ contributions, exhortations of Black and Brown Power at the expense of Women’s and Lesbian Power, campus occupations that harbored mixed (and even conflicting) intentions among participants, dialogues on strategy and social change that focused on reconstructing institutions without nurturing inter-communal respect in the long process. In the swift momentum of the campuses’ strike actions, it is unclear whether or how these concerns were resolved by SEEK faculty and students. This remains a crucial part of the strike’s story to further uncover and evaluate, and highlights an enduring dilemma for archiving how radicalized communities in motion process critiques, both internally and publicly. Even so, the strike electrified student and faculty relations, transforming the entire university.

Bambara had also been actively involved in the strike, hosting open panels on the Black Aesthetic on campus, and encouraging her Black and Puerto Rican women students to record their rap sessions inside the occupation.<sup>32</sup> She encouraged these dynamics as part of a larger praxis of self-initiated student learning, and wasted no time to compel the students to effectively transition their energies after the campus occupation ended. In “Dear Bloods,” a memo Bambara circulated to student organizers immediately after the strike, she minces few words to urge them that making “something out of nothing is so much better than blowing a fuse.”<sup>33</sup> Bambara gives examples and contact information for Black women students initiating “counter-courses” on History, Literature, and Sociology. In the process, she reaffirms lessons from “Realizing the Dream of a Black University” on self-determination and dual power—how autonomous projects like freedom schools (even inside formal colleges) can pressure institutions to change, at the same time that they develop a claim on who should legitimately lead the institutions.

Until [Black and Puerto Rican Studies] is fully operating (fall ‘69), the responsibility of getting that education rests with you in large part. Jumping up and down, foaming at the mouth, rattling coffee-cups

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<sup>32</sup> See Jones, Adele and Group, “Ebony Minds, Black Voices,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*; Washington Square Press; New York; 1970; p. 227-237.

<sup>33</sup> Bambara, Toni Cade; “Realizing the Dream of a Black University” & Other Writings (Part II); co-edited by Makeba Lavan and Conor Tomás Reed; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; 28.



and other weaponry don't get it. If you are serious, set up a counter course in the Experimental College. If you are serious, contact each other.<sup>34</sup>

Because of her close proximity and built trust with these students, Bambara could critique their shortcomings while pushing for them to actualize demands directly.

In the immediate aftermath of the strike, Jordan also interacted with the students' five demands, taking their compositions as seriously as she had with her youth literacy programs. She wrote essays whose themes would later appear in her landmark work "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," printed in the October 1969 issue of *Evergreen Review*.<sup>35</sup> This first major published document on Black Studies by a Black woman educator at the time circulated lessons from the City College rebellion to a broad counter-cultural audience. Read alongside the archives and published works of Bambara and Lorde at the time, these essays recover how Black feminist teachers at City College shaped explosive institutional changes when the Black Power movement erupted across campuses, even if they were overlooked for Black and Euro-descended men colleagues' efforts.

Jordan directly addresses the two most essential strike demands: curricula and admissions. She writes, "For Blacks, there is nothing optional about 'Black Experience' and/or 'Black Studies.' We are that experience, and we must study, must know ourselves." While Jordan proposes study alliances between poor people of all colors, this demand for Black Studies by and for Black people (and, by coalitional extension, Puerto Rican and Third World Studies) builds upon the community control paradigm that had heightened over the last several years in New York City. Jordan concludes, "Beyond Black or White, there is the search for Life Studies, and therefore, there is this question Universities will have to answer, through radical change, or else perish: How do you provide for the Study of Human Life?"<sup>36</sup> Jordan also admired how the admissions demand created a bridge between present and future Black and Puerto Rican City College

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Jordan, June; "The City and City College;" June Jordan Papers, Series XI; Box 75; Folder 11; Schlesinger Library; Radcliffe Institute; Harvard University; Cambridge. "Black Commentary on White Discussion of Black Studies," June Jordan Papers, Series XI; Box 75; Folder 9; Schlesinger Library; Radcliffe Institute; Harvard University; Cambridge. "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," in *Evergreen Review*; October 1969. Also see Jordan, June; "Life Studies," 1966-1976; co-edited by Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Jordan, June; "Black Commentary on White Discussion of Black Studies," June Jordan Papers, Series XI; Box 75; Folder 9. Schlesinger Library; Radcliffe Institute; Harvard University; Cambridge.



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students that “reache[s] outside the University province and into high school habits of student tragedy.”<sup>37</sup> Pointing out how the failures of public schooling affect New York City children--as in the case of the nearest high school to City College, which had a 65 percent dropout rate--Jordan proclaims, “Black and Puerto Rican students at the City College... insist upon community. Serving the positive implications of Black Studies (Life Studies), students everywhere must insist on new college admissions policies that will guide and accelerate necessary, radical change, at all levels of education.”<sup>38</sup>

### Black Studies Boomerang

After the strike, SEEK educators worked to boomerang outwards these perspectives on admission, curriculum, and neighborhood involvement. For Jordan, this meant engaging with another prominent site of educational transformation: Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn. For over a year, this neighborhood had been at the center of a highly visible conflict between the largely Black community, who were given control of the school district as part of an experimental school decentralization program, and the United Federation of Teachers, who led a strike to resist the community board’s decision to reassign a number of Euro-descended teachers and administrators to another district.

In June 1970 Jordan delivered a graduation speech-poem to high school-bound students at I.S. 55 in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. She urges the graduating students to remember “the truth of your absolute value as a human life,” and to “insist that your studies shall become Life Studies: Black Studies. Urban Studies. Environmental Studies.” Jordan’s words resonated in an imperiled context: as she described it, high school at the time was where “a tragic majority of Black and Puerto Rican children drop out of sight: they leave school: because what happens to them in the classroom annihilates their rightful pride, and meets their earnest, real needs with nothing more than irrelevant and contemptuous instruction.” In contrast, Life Studies could teach students what they needed to know, and would honor the particularities of their experiences. When Jordan beckons in this speech for these young students to demand Black Studies as a part of Life Studies, her words resonate in this immediate context of a movement for Black community

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<sup>37</sup> Jordan, June; “*Life Studies*,” 1966–1976; co-edited by Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; p. 47.

<sup>38</sup>Jordan, June; “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person;” in *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays*; Virago Press; London; 1989; p. 28.



control of education (and cities). “For, what is the purpose of a school,” she asks students and their families, “if it will not prepare you to live your own life of your own choosing in the community of your choice?”<sup>39</sup>

Bambara’s own landmark 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* also acted as a new kind of Black, Puerto Rican, and Third World coalitional feminist studies curriculum open to all.<sup>40</sup> Bambara gathered materials written by Black and Brown women students and teachers from City College and CUNY, alongside the work of Frances Beale and the Third World Women's Alliance, Grace Lee Boggs in the Detroit struggle, Pat Robinson and the Damned, and more.<sup>41</sup> Because she wasn't a member of any revolutionary groups at the time, Bambara could more porously interact with a variety of radical cultural/social initiatives without having to pledge fealty or close herself off to this or that tendency. However, this doesn't mean she avoided uncomfortable “in-house” interventions. The anthology encouraged a “crowd-sourcing” method of strategizing women's liberation work across ethnic backgrounds and groups to challenge misogyny in movements, the misappropriation of Third Worldist guerrilla tactics in the U.S., and the need to understand multiply enwoven oppressions (an early framing of what would become “intersectionality” discourse). *Black Woman*’s relevance is especially enduring for how it defends women's right to contraception, in a strange time in which some Black Power men leaders equated contraception with genocide. Bambara also had a keen sense of timing to publish with large presses while also supporting independent Black Arts presses, in a felicitous moment in which capitalist commodification of Black Arts actually helped the movement reach very broad readerships. Bambara’s insistence that *the Black Woman* cost under a dollar and be able to fit in one’s pocket helped the book reach a second printing in a month, and gain broad readership.

In one of her two essays for the anthology, “On the Issue of Roles,” she lambasts heady misogynist elements of campus organizing at the time, and redefines the roles needed to engage in social change *here* at *home*, anticipating future women of color’s feminist analyses on social reproduction, care, and the need to counter strands of Black nationalism that perpetuate sexism. We can see how the “Dear Bloods” memo’s

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<sup>39</sup> Jordan, June; “*Life Studies*,” 1966–1976; co-edited by Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; p. 30-31, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Bambara, Toni Cade; *The Black Woman: An Anthology*; Washington Square Press; New York; 1970. We also see further examples of community crowd-sourced projects celebrating Black and Third World womanhood: Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (editors); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (with an introduction by Bambara); Persephone Press; Watertown; 1981. Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (editors); *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*; Feminist Press; New York; 1982. Smith, Barbara (editor); *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press; Boston; 1983.

<sup>41</sup>Bambara, Toni Cade; “How She Came By Her Name,” in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*; Vintage; New York; 1999; p. 230-231.





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terse mentorship expands to reach a national audience of Black and Third World students and community radicals:

Instant coffee is the hallmark of current rhetoric. But we do have time. We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships. Mouths don't win the war. It don't even win the people. Neither does haste, urgency, and stretch-out-now insistence. Not all speed is movement. Running off to mimeograph a fuck-whitey leaflet, leaving your mate to brood, is not revolutionary. Hopping a plane to rap to someone else's "community" while your son struggles alone with the Junior Scholastic assignment on "The Dark Continent" is not revolutionary. Sitting around murder-mouthing incorrect niggers while your father goes upside your mother's head is not revolutionary. Mapping out a building takeover when your term paper is overdue and your scholarship is under review is not revolutionary... If your house ain't in order, you ain't in order. It is so much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain't out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be. And arguing that instant-coffee-ten-minutes-to-midnight alibi to justify hasty-headed dealings with your mate is shit. Ain't no such animal as an instant guerrilla.<sup>42</sup>

Bambara's chastisement is witheringly relevant to this day. She aims her critique of sexist movement "roles" in the specific terms of university struggles, with Black and Third World men students as the audience whom she hopes to convince of a Black radical feminist analysis. Anticipating the 1970s shift from externalized to interpersonal struggles, Bambara sought new ways to define and articulate being "militant." As an antidote to some chaotic disorganizing tendencies that threatened to calcify in social movements by 1969, she attempts to model creative humanizing experimentation, encourage diverse solidarities, and develop urban anti-colonial strategies that don't refashion the macho mystique of armed struggle. This meant developing broad-based coalitions led by working-class people of colors and genders at CUNY and beyond, and "militant" anti-imperialist efforts that didn't reproduce the hierarchical, sexist, and tokenizing practices of the U.S. military.

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<sup>42</sup> Bambara, Toni Cade; "On the Issue of Roles;" in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*; Washington Square Press; New York; 1970; 134-135.



## Open Admissions and the Costs of Upheaval

By Fall 1970, the CUNY Board of Higher Education accelerated and expanded the admissions demand for the creation of “Open Admissions”—allowing all New York City high school graduates entrance to CUNY’s two- or four-year colleges—even as the City College administration derailed the Black and Puerto Rican Studies demand. Although the Board, city, and state had planned to implement Open Admissions by 1975, they flooded the campuses five years early.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, they refused to increase resources; overwhelmed students, faculty, and staff workers; and, in general, troubled the success of free substantive education for New Yorkers of all colors. The SEEK program in particular became inundated, embattled, and under-resourced right at the point when it was providing an exceptional new model for what a politically engaged, writing-composition program in a nurturing, small-scale environment could look like. This post-strike educational policy, today considered a hallmark of CUNY’s democratic successes, could arguably be measured as a form of institutional reform-as-sabotage. Thus, a critical revision on the Open Admissions legacy offers a lesson to movements: for those who advocate institutional change from below to be wary of unsustainable reforms from above. Nevertheless, the 1969 City College strike opened the doors of CUNY for many working-class students of all ethnicities, a process that dealt a vigorous blow to longtime racial-class barriers to public higher education. This ground-breaking policy would be replicated nationwide.

The struggle within CUNY to maintain Open Admissions and establish a form of community control that could account for Bambara’s “Black University,” Jordan’s “Life Studies,” and Lorde’s Black lesbian pedagogies persisted, despite considerable backlash. From 1970 onwards, conservative CUNY faculty and mainstream media crafted a racist elitist discourse on “The Death of the University”—in which Open Admissions allegedly only benefited poor Black and Puerto Rican students, and thus CUNY’s standards were in downfall—which detracted attention away from the deep retrenchment of fewer resources for larger classes. As Jordan understood from her housing advocacy days, the long-practiced urban policy of maintaining overcrowded and under-resourced slums in impoverished NYC areas became a model for forcibly overcrowding and underfunding CUNY after Open Admissions.

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<sup>43</sup> Dyer, Conrad; “Protest and the Politics of Open Admissions: The Impact of the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community (of City College) (diss.);” CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 1990; p.146. See also Biondi, Martha; *The Black Revolution on Campus*; University of California Press; Berkeley; 2014; p. 134.



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On a daily interpersonal level, the impact of these policies exhausted teachers, students, and staff at City College, as they became nationally recognized as a site of transformative admissions and writing pedagogies. Fellow SEEK educator Adrienne Rich laments of this disorienting time “an overcrowded campus where in winter there is often no place to sit between classes... with the incessant pressure of time and money driving at [students] to rush, to get through, to amass the needed credits somehow, to drop out, to stay on with gritted teeth.”<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, these colleagues tenderly looked after each other, their families, and their related creative projects.

The wave of Open Admissions unevenly cascaded across CUNY, as Lorde encountered while teaching a Fall 1969-Spring 1970 “Race and Education” class in the Lehman College Education Department to “99 percent white” students who were highly resistant to her attempts to squarely address the theme.<sup>45</sup> Lorde relocated in the Fall of 1970 to the rapidly desegregating John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where she began as the English Department’s first Black lecturer, and then in February 1971 joined the newly formed Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department.<sup>46</sup> Opened in 1965 as the College of Police Science (COPS), and then renamed in 1967, John Jay College was specifically created to grant New York City police officers college degrees, and was recognized by the federal government as a site of law enforcement theory and practice. Lorde’s experiences at Tougaloo and City College contrasted with this school where police officer students wore their guns inside classrooms, and the ideological directions of teaching was carefully monitored. Akin to City College, the start of Open Admissions in 1970 also dramatically changed the demographics at John Jay, where the previously majority Euro-descended middle-class police student body was joined by an influx of Black and Puerto Rican non-police working-class students. Between 1969 and 1974, the population of Black, Puerto Rican, and “other” students shifted from 14 percent to 44 percent of the student body.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rich, Adrienne; “Teaching Language in Open Admissions (1972);” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*; W.W. Norton and Company; New York; 1978; p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> Lorde, Audre; “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*; Crossing Press; New York; 2007; p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-97.

<sup>47</sup> Gumbs, Alexis Pauline; “Nobody Mean More: Black Feminist Pedagogy and Solidarity;” in *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*; University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis; 2014; p. 245.



Lorde's trajectory as a "Poet as Teacher—Human as Poet—Teacher as Human" is pivotally shaped in this moment of teaching writing composition through history, literature, psychology sociology, and urban studies to a John Jay student body whose social composition was rapidly reconstituting.<sup>48</sup> Her teaching archives show a dynamic approach to writing and social composition, in which she critically explored through an interdisciplinary Black studies methodology the cultural and scientific depths of racism with her Black, Puerto Rican, and Euro-descended students— those policed and policing, suddenly together in the same classroom. For one academic year, Lorde was instrumental in the formation of the John Jay Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department. During this time, she taught "Race and the Urban Situation," with the subtitle "'or Civilization or Death to All American Savages' (Officer's toast, 1779)," in which she and students examined settler colonialism and enslavement against Native and African peoples as deeply entwined originating forms of structural racism in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

Lorde outlines in her class notes on the mechanics of oppression, "The 1<sup>st</sup> primary technique is dehumanization. What is? the easiest way to justify oppression is to make object just that—object. Not humans in ships—things, slaves, Negroes. The racist must create an image in his mind of something deserving oppression-nonhuman." Instead of an ahistoric view of racism and whiteness existing across all time, Lorde emphasizes a historical process: "Institutional racism against Indians could justify wiping them off land. Same development of slavery. First blacks here were not slaves—but indentured servants. But with the growth of tobacco as a cash crop, free labor pool was needed. Not Indians. Blacks. 1629 rights (?)—Christian. 1655 English. 1660 White." Lorde prompted her students in dialogue and writing to consider: "What are 1. the effects of racism in yourself 2. what are you doing or prepared to do to alter these attitudes in yourself [and] in your world." Her semester midterm posed a question by Malcolm X on how to confront contemporary racism equipped with history's lessons: "Power steps back only in the face of more power. Do you find this an accurate statement in terms of history of black people in America? Discuss four historical occurrences from Before the Mayflower as examples illustrating your answer."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> As Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown point out, "If scholars tend to separate the poet from the teacher from the human, then Lorde writes them back in as one." Lorde, Audre; *"I teach myself in outline," Notes, Journals, Syllabi, & an Excerpt from Deotha*; co-edited by Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25-26, 29, 31.



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During this time, Lorde wrote poetry prolifically, publishing in 1973 *From A Land Where Other People Live*. One poem in the collection, "Movement Song"--an intimate plea for recognition within fleeting exchanges between two people--was perhaps written for June Jordan, who wrote of it in a letter to Lorde, "it is mysterious still, to me: dense and beautiful, and nowhere harsh."<sup>51</sup> Lorde's poem to Toni Cade Bambara, "Dear Toni Instead of a Letter of Congratulation Upon Your Book and Your Daughter Whom You Say You Are Raising To Be a Correct Little Sister," is also featured, enshrining their City College bond backwards and forwards across generations of Black women. In 1974, Lorde published *New York Head Shop and Museum*, whose concluding poem, "Blackstudies," reveals her acrimonious conditions of teaching, albeit enshrouded in imagistic nightmarish scenes of a teacher and her students in a classroom seventeen floors high. Lorde's teaching archives illuminate the context of this poem's anguish: multiple department memos document how she navigated severe conflicts over the direction of the Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department between the John Jay administration, Chairperson F. Beresford Jones, and its faculty members. This situation was exacerbated when Black students were pitted against her as a lesbian feminist teacher, her office desk was searched, and she received threatening phone calls against her and her children.<sup>52</sup> The scholar Angela Bowen writes how the poem interweaves Lorde's hidden pedagogical injuries from Tougaloo to John Jay,

'Blackstudies' is a psycho-sociological study in fear: of being rejected by students as an 'inauthentic' black woman because of her marriage to a white man; of failing in her attempt to explain her wider vision of the world to students deeply immersed in their 1960s pride of solidarity in 'Blackness'; and of the painful shunning she endures (her defiance notwithstanding) at the hands of the Black Arts Movement hierarchy... Lorde's needs were two-fold: to channel her feelings directly into poetry and keep the meaning opaque for protection.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Letter from June Jordan to Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde Papers; Series 1; Box 3; Folder 63; Spelman College Archives; Atlanta.

<sup>52</sup> See Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown's introduction to Lorde, Audre; "I teach myself in outline," *Notes, Journals, Syllabi, & an Excerpt from Deotha*; co-edited by Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Bowen, Angela; "Diving Into Audre Lorde's 'Blackstudies,'" in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Vol. 4.1; Durham; 2003; p. 114-115.



This poem offers a translucent mythological portrait of teaching at CUNY, one that reveals a trepidatious scenario between a teacher and their students.<sup>54</sup> The poem candidly portrays the teacher's alienation from a group of students with whom she is supposed to have a profound sense of ethnic/cultural belonging. Instead, she fears that the truths she teaches will be held against her, or that she will be chewed up for analytic nourishment and then discarded, as seen in these excerpts:

outside my door they are waiting  
with questions that feel like judgements  
when they are unanswered [...]

I am afraid  
that the mouths I feed will turn against me  
will refuse to swallow in the silence  
I am warning them to avoid  
I am afraid they will kernel me out like a walnut  
extracting the nourishing seed  
as my husk stains their lips  
with the mixed colors of my pain.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, as a *Black studies poem* that mirrors her teaching approach, it offers an interdisciplinary Afro-syncretic symbolism "that knits truth into fable / to leave my story behind," and in the process,

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<sup>54</sup> Readers could consider this poem alongside Adrienne Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck", a 1972 poem that I analyze as a record of her experiences in SEEK classrooms, hidden in plain sight, documenting the program's tenacious aims to create liberatory education after the Open Admissions deluge. Bowen's article title links colleagues Lorde and Rich, but does not extend the analysis that "Diving Into the Wreck" was as well a portrait of a CUNY classroom experience. See my essay "Diving Into SEEK: Adrienne Rich and Social Movements at the City College of New York, 1968-1974," in Laura Hinton (editor); *Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero: Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in U.S. Contemporary Women's Poetics*; Lexington Books; New York; 2016. Also see Rich, Adrienne; "What We Are Part Of": *Teaching at CUNY, 1968-1974 (Parts I-II)*; co-edited by Iemanjá Brown, Stefania Heim, erica kaufman, Kristin Moriah, Conor Tomás Reed, Talia Shalev, and Wendy Tronrud; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 4*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Lorde, Audre; "Blackstudies;" in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*; W.W. Norton and Company; New York; 2000; p. 153-154. Ellipsis mine.



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differently ritualizes the Western-enforced social space of the classroom, even in full risk of these kinds of collisions and misconceptions.<sup>56</sup>

It's not until the mid-1980s, well after she left John Jay, that Lorde would write transparently about the intricate conflicts she endured there. After she had completed *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde began a second biomythographical work, *Deotha*, about a Black artist named Deotha Chambers who teaches in a Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department at Connors College under an authoritarian chairperson named Cumberbatch Smith.<sup>57</sup> Reading across "Blackstudies," *Deotha*, and Lorde's John Jay teaching archives can illuminate the fraught process whereby Black and Puerto Rican Studies was institutionalized by faculty, students, and an administration with at times opposing intentions. Lorde offers this problematic on how critiquing people within an emerging oppressed institution, organization, or movement may give ammunition for it to be attacked, but as she later affirmed, "your silence will not protect you" either.<sup>58</sup> These all-too-secret pedagogical battles in the early 1970s would shape her defiant emergence into the national spotlight as a qualitatively different kind of public intellectual poet.

*Deotha* lucidly describes how Black and Puerto Rican coalitional work in CUNY and New York City were imperiled once they became institutionalized in a university setting with rigid logics of appointed leadership, hierarchies of students/teachers/administrators, and the misogyny and homophobia that roiled behind an empowering Black (patriarchal heterosexist) Studies veneer. However, *Deotha* emphasizes the intimate value of a Black woman educator's self-care and self-reflection, as well as the larger structural and interpersonal conflicts at the college that necessitate such healing. In a bathtub scene, Deotha narrates her cleansing process to immerse readers in a ritualized practice that renders common household items talismanic. Her self-soothing is disrupted when she remembers to quickly arrange childcare in order to attend an emergency department meeting that night. As Deotha prepares to call a neighbor to ask the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>57</sup> Surprisingly, this revelatory work, whose unfinished vignettes are housed in her archives, had only been written about in Alexis De Veaux's 2004 biography *Warrior Poet* until the 2018 publication of Lorde's teaching archives, which excerpts the work. As Lorde began to confront living with cancer, this writing project would sustain her from the mid-1980s until her death in 1992. At one point, en route to St. Croix to receive medical treatment for liver cancer, she wrote, "Make Deotha Chamber's story live." Lorde, Audre; *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*; Firebrand Books; Ithaca; 1988; p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> Lorde, Audre; "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*; Crossing Press; New York; 2007; p. 41. Lorde also addresses this dynamic in her 1982 speech "Learning from the 60s;" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*; Crossing Press; New York; 2007.



favor, she receives an incoming call, in which she hears, “‘Leave our department alone, lezzie!’ The young angry voice was abrupt even a shade embarrassed Dee thought and was rapidly followed by a click as the connection was broken... As she calls the neighbor, she wonders if the voice had been one of her own students.”<sup>59</sup> This fictionalized account mirrors Lorde’s own encounters with Black student harassment in a Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department that she’s working to construct. Unlike the aftermath of her poem “Power,” in which she fears crossing paths with the John Jay student police officer Thomas J. Shea who killed the fifteen year-old Black boy Clifford Glover, in this case, the source of threatening anguish comes from potentially one of her own Black students.

From the secrets and silences of “Blackstudies,” the John Jay teaching archive, and Lorde’s known legacy, *Deotha* emerges as a forcefully clear account of this period at John Jay. In the extended excerpt below, a series of paragraphs expose the multiple layers of the BPRS department fiasco, in a *compositional* working through of contradictions between an administration keen to celebrate the department’s demise, professors who break coalitional ties to assume more institutional power in the college, and students who are urged to reverse the alliances their strikes had recently amassed, and Deotha. Going beyond the surface identity-belonging that would come to characterize the rigid “political line” of some radical orthodoxies at the time, Lorde instead focuses on the weaving together of *complications* to exposit the conditions of her teaching and living in this moment.

After bitter student strikes of the past two years, Connors College was committed on paper to [The Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department’s] cosmetic existence, a victory won by two years of students striking for open admissions. But there were many forces watching gleefully from the sidelines anticipating its still-birth, or early self-destruction.

The four other members of the proposed department, ethnically and sexually mixed, were trying to have some input into the growing acrimony between Cumberbatch and Isabella [Gomez D’Avila, a Puerto Rican professor] before that acrimony encouraged polarities between Black and Puerto Rican students.

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<sup>59</sup>Lorde, Audre; “Excerpt from *Deotha: Bath/School/Pia*,” in “*I teach myself in outline*,” *Notes, Journals, Syllabi, & an Excerpt from Deotha*; co-edited by Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; p. 43-51.





Nursing the distrust between Black and Puerto Rican students on campus was the most convenient tool for encouraging chaos.

Complicated by the fact that Cumberbatch Smith, Black sociologist and encyclopedia salesman from New Jersey slated by the administration to head the new department, was a serious mistake, in Dee's opinion. She has seen the look in his eyes, lightning quick hidden, but not fast enough. The avarice for power.

Complicated by the fact that most of the Black students at Connors, bruised and suspicious of the administration unspoken opposition to the department, mistook loyalty to Cumberbatch as loyalty to the cause of Black Studies at Connors College. The long suppressed aspirations of many of the Black students had been given new voice by a wind of possibility called Open Admissions sweeping through public campuses, the most promising result of the student unrest inaugurated by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Vietnam war. With the passionate over-simplification of their years, they could not hear that Cumbah Smith's thirst for self-aggrandisement was no useful substitute for a creatively conceived and executed Afrocentric curriculum.

Complicated by the fact that a largely silent group of students together with members of the junior Black faculty did not accept the idea of Smith as their choice of chairman, and this group looked upon Dee as the other viable Black alternative. After all, she and Cumbah had been at Connors the longest. But this was 1969, Nationtime, a time for new beginnings based upon the old ways rediscovered. And in the errors of an incomplete vision, none of the group was willing to suggest publicly at this racial juncture the idea of selecting a Black woman 'over' a Black man, no matter how incompetent.

Complicated by the fact that, even though she knew she could do a better job than Cumberbatch one hand tied behind her, the last thing in the world Deotha Chambers wanted in her already complex life was the chairmanship of an embattled Black Studies Department.

Complicated by the fact that the only other possible candidate was Isabella Gomez D'Avila, young militant Puerto Rican Nationalist whose worst furies had recently been redirected towards all things Black. And true, Cumberbatch had declared war upon her at first sight, fueled by his woman hatred and distrust of all things Latin. Deotha felt conflicted and uncomfortable whenever she thought of Isabella, whose abrasive manner and quick angers too often led Deotha to ignore the basic commonality of their visions.



Opening her consciousness to the racial complications brewing at Connors made Dee shudder, and gave her an instant headache. A relevant Black education. IF NOT NOW, WHEN? The very thought of it was an excitement that percolated through Deotha also, that kept her thinking and dreaming of the possibility for Black students at Connors. She could see the dangers of a limited vision at the same time as she felt her own grave reluctance to implement any broader one.<sup>60</sup>

The archival record of this period at John Jay remains unclear about whether infighting between Black Studies and Puerto Rican Studies faculty manifested in the ways that Lorde dramatizes here, but if so, it's worth inquiring why and how the Black and Puerto Rican coalitional work that emerged in New York City around school desegregation and ethnic studies creation became endangered once Black and Puerto Rican Studies were institutionalized in this university setting. Nevertheless, speculative possibilities abound on what a Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department led by Audre Lorde could have manifested. As members of the BPRSD pushed her out, she relocated to the English Department at John Jay.

In one early interdisciplinary example of Lorde's role in claiming room for women's studies, Black women's studies, and Black lesbian studies in universities, she and Blanche Wiesen Cook co-taught a Spring 1972 English class, "American Women in Black and White." They discussed gender and race archetypes, radicalism across suffrage and abolition, and sexual liberation with texts by writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Mary Beard, Frantz Fanon, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Calvin Hernton, and Gerda Lerner.<sup>61</sup> Cook recalls that even though all of the course enrollees were "police officers and fire fighters and men, very quickly the women in the bars, in Page Three, and the Sea Colony heard that we were teaching. And they invaded our class, and then very quickly the police students brought their wives and their mothers and their sisters and their friends, and it was the most crowded classroom imaginable."<sup>62</sup> It's possible that in the more general arena of the English Department, rather than in the tightly surveilled Black and Puerto Rican Studies, that Lorde could tactically convene such disparate groups of students and community members for this rare kind of cross-pollinating social inquiry.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 48-50.

<sup>61</sup> Audre Lorde Papers; Series 10; Box 83; Folder 26; Spelman College Archives, Atlanta.

<sup>62</sup> Cook, Blanche Wiesen; "The Lesbian Movement with Blanche Wiesen Cook;" interview by Alice Kessler-Harris; New York; April 3, 2017: [www.allreadable.com/f61eQv8q](http://www.allreadable.com/f61eQv8q). Page Three and the Sea Colony were famous New York City lesbian bars at this time.



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From the mid-1970s onwards, Lorde turned her Blackstudies pedagogy, poetics, and prose inside outward to social movements more broadly. Her latter 1970s poetry collections *Coal*, *Between Our Selves*, and *The Black Unicorn* continued to embed teaching insights on the transitory value of printed words; the responsibility to name when Black lives are murdered, imprisoned, or die early from a lack of quality healthcare; and the fecundity of African orishas and places for a Black/women/lesbian/movement readership. The difficult negotiation between herself and larger coalitions whose entryways were at times fiercely guarded would become crystallized in Lorde's famous unessentializable self-assertion as a Black lesbian feminist socialist warrior poet mother of two bi-ethnic children.<sup>63</sup>

During this time, the concurrent emergence of a racialized discourse that Open Admissions only benefited poor Blacks and Puerto Ricans, coupled with the financial crisis in New York City and the cataclysmic domestic effects of the US defeat in Vietnam, set the conditions for the CUNY administration to impose tuition for all CUNY students in 1976. The aftermath of a defeat of imperialism in Vietnam radically altered the country, initiating an economic structural readjustment that would pave the way for a significant reversal of social conditions and aspirations. Tuition at CUNY, tied into New York City's fiscal crisis, became a national issue.<sup>64</sup>

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

We cannot accept the death of this great, free University because we cannot accept the death of the spirit, the death of aspirations, the death of the future, that will surely follow for our children, the

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<sup>63</sup>Lorde, Audre; "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference;" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*; Crossing Press; New York; 2007; p. 114.

<sup>64</sup>Franklin, H. Bruce; *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies*; University of Massachusetts Press; Amherst; 2001; p. 127.



students... We will fast. We will take a cut in salary. We will fight. The possibility that we may lose is not a possibility: we have to win... We speak on behalf of our children, and our students; we call upon all of the people of the City of New York to join with us on behalf of all the children and all of the students of the City of New York, to resist this death.<sup>65</sup>

The Fall 1976 imposition of tuition occurred with massive layoffs of many of the faculty who had helped usher in Open Admissions. In contrast, these aggressive economic structural readjustments would pave the way for a significant reversal of 1960s-70s social movements' aspirations. CUNY and New York City suffered economic shock therapy that would soon bend the nation's cities and colleges towards privatization and sharpened inequalities.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

The experiences of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde before and during their time at the City College of New York and John Jay College illustrate how such experimental creative teaching methods could blossom in the SEEK Program at this particular conjuncture in New York City, and why the political and educational elite fought so vociferously to counteract their visions for self-determination in learning. These teacher-writers' forms of movement *composition*—willing clarity and direction towards liberation, backwards and forwards in time, through writing, circulation, and actions—kept them responsive to an “authenticating audience” of their students, peers, and fellow insurgents as members of an extended inter-generational pedagogical family.<sup>67</sup> As movement writers, they served as chroniclers and conduits of multiple voices and actions, while regularly publishing and promoting others' writing alongside their own, in smaller independent publications and mainstream presses. Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde's archives at City College, Schlesinger Library in Radcliffe, and Spelman College brim with the rebellious loving energy of their teaching, writing, organizing, and friendships. Only by a *coalitional* reading across their archives, interviews,

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<sup>65</sup> Jordan, June; “*Life Studies*,” 1966–1976; co-edited by Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev; in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7*; CUNY Graduate Center; New York; 2018; p. 53.

<sup>66</sup>See Phillips-Fein, Kim; *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*; Metropolitan Books; New York; 2017.

<sup>67</sup>See Massiah, Louis; “The Authenticating Audience;” *FeministWire*; November 18, 2014: <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/11/authenticating-audience>.



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published works, spoken performances, storytelling, and contextual environments does a fuller picture emerge of their literary and pedagogical breadth.

Bambara's dream of a "Black University" wasn't simply about a place or an institution but about a vision, a form of consciousness, a way of collaborating in this fraught world to actualize future world-shifting alternatives. All her work provides tools to navigate ways of getting there, but at the same time, she admonishes—with humor and love—the world of "instant coffee" too many of us live in, and that "not all speed is movement." For Bambara, transforming society *out there* and *in here*, from wisdom acquired through many experiences, required a patient radical vision beyond one protest, communiqué, revolutionary tradition, school, semester, year, decade, even lifetime. Moreover, while the development of Black Studies is often associated with movements in and around colleges and universities, in Jordan's youth literacies program and speeches she delivered while at City College, we see that the urgency and relevance of Black Studies as Life Studies is rooted in her advocacy for students of all ages in all arenas of living. Jordan's record of youth-to-university work in New York City and at CUNY shows how she prepared her students to engage in a kind of structural analysis to inform rigorous critiques of institutions as well as ways to change them. Finally, Lorde's poetics read anew contain hidden pedagogical lessons to be further explored. Her dedication to perpetually evolving solidarities (and pitfalls) with working-class City College and John Jay College students of diverse ethnicities, sexualities, and genders can help us situate her later lesbian-feminist calls for self-determination. Furthermore, her dual engagement in a Feminist Third Wave intersectional analysis refused the separatism of some radical projects at the time, a self-isolation that she believed was insufficient for total liberation.

For Caribbean and Latin American readers, these historical accounts can offer entryways for how to reactivate dialogues and actions that center Afro-descended and lesbian women in radical communal learning across the hemisphere.<sup>68</sup> The CUNY *conscientization* process in which Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde participated with their colleagues and students can be studied alongside the lessons of the late 1960s and 1970s educational movements across the Caribbean and Latin America, which included vast literacy programs; struggles against privatization, regime changes, and sexualized state violence; and mass protest

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<sup>68</sup> The writings and actions of Julieta Paredes in Bolivia, Ochy Curiel and Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso in Colombia, and Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro in Brazil, among others, offer contemporary examples of these legacies being revitalized.



movements in Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay that inspired similar waves of dissent. In doing so, we can assess how the emerging neoliberal policies that attacked the Caribbean and Latin America were also aimed at the City University of New York in the moment when it was being transformed by Black and Third World communities. Throughout their lives, Bambara, Jordan, and Lorde vigorously advocated for international solidarity, in which our mutual liberation is entwined across borders, but grounded in historical specificities and unsimplified collaborations. Let us cast forward these vibrant arcs of their lives to help orient our present shared moment of revolutionary possibilities.

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