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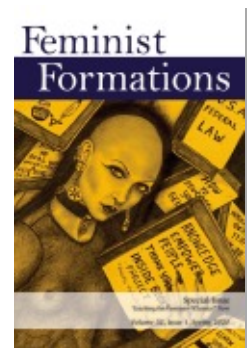
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# Confronting Myths of Exceptional, Black Leisure Travel: Teaching June Jordan’s “Report from the Bahamas” in the Contemporary Classroom

Randi K. Gill-Sadler

*This article demonstrates the pedagogical value of teaching June Jordan’s essay “Report from the Bahamas” (1982) alongside “It’s Better in the Bahamas” tourism advertisements from Essence magazine to critique narratives of exceptional, Black American travel in the contemporary classroom. Whereas contemporary discourses on Black American leisure travel characterize Black American leisure mobility as a mode of resistance to US racism and surveillance, Jordan’s essay asks readers to consider whose immobility and containment, via imperial structures, makes Black American leisure possible. The article outlines an assignment wherein students must create advertisements that resist the Caribbean as paradise trope using Jordan’s essay and highlights some of the students’ responses to the assignment.*

**Keywords:** Bahamas / Essence magazine / feminist teaching / Jordan, June / neoliberalism / tourism / US Empire

If you search “#travelnoire” on Instagram, your search will yield approximately 1.4 million photos of Black travelers leisurely exploring various international destinations. The hashtag takes its name from the digital publishing platform *Travel Noire* that features content for and about Black travelers. Zim Ugochukwu, founder of *Travel Noire*, cites a dearth of representations of Black travelers in mainstream travel discourses as her inspiration to create “something special and beautiful for people of color” that would ultimately become the popular, digital platform (qtd. in Pointdujour 2014, 1). The emergence and popularity

of Black travel blogs like *Travel Noire* and *NoMadness*, and their accompanying hashtags and social media pages, reinvigorates attention to the politics of Black leisure travel. In the context of historic and ongoing exclusion of Black travelers from mainstream leisure travel discourse, specifically, coupled with the persistence of racial profiling, surveillance, and policing of Black mobility more generally, many Black American travelers who contribute to the blog and use these hashtags view their participation in Black leisure travel as a resistive and reparative practice against anti-Black racism. However, this posturing celebrates the accomplishment and performance of a Black cosmopolitan identity without a critical discussion of whose immobility and whose containment often make Black American leisure travel possible. How might we, as instructors, use Black feminist thought and theory—narrative forms, stories, and play with language (Christian 1987, 52)—to disrupt neoliberal narratives of exceptional, Black (American) travel that, at times, uncritically celebrate Black mobilities that reify colonial and neocolonial ways of engaging leisure travel? In this essay, I will detail how I use June Jordan’s classic essay “Report from the Bahamas” (2003), alongside additional Black feminist theorists and Black women’s visual cultures, to expose neocolonial values that underpin various iterations of Black leisure travel. I will also detail an assignment wherein I ask students to create tourism advertisements, based off of Jordan’s essay, in an attempt to untether Black leisure travel, and Black mobility broadly, from discourses of exceptionalism and neocolonialism.

### **A Classic Text for the Contemporary Moment**

For the past three years, I have taught various iterations of a course I call “Traveling while Black.” With a specific focus on African American and Afro-Caribbean literature, the course explores travel writing as a genre—its conventions, aesthetics, and histories—and how travel writing reinforces and challenges both real and imagined conceptualizations of belonging in national and diasporic Black communities. Moreover, the course critically interrogates various types of “travelers” including the immigrant, the fugitive, the exiled, the ethnographer, and the tourist. I ask students to consider the racialized and gendered assumptions attached to each of these figures and how these “traveling identities”—which often overlap for many of the writers in the course—shape and influence these travelers’ approaches to writing.

I foreground three major objectives in the Black leisure travel unit: (1) To establish the role of slavery and colonialism in the construction of the Caribbean as paradise; (2) to establish how tourism perpetuates the Caribbean as paradise trope; and (3) to identify national, racial, and gendered factors that make the consumption of Caribbean as paradise through leisure travel possible for some Black people and not others. I have included various materials in the unit over the last three years including, but not limited to, literary and theoretical

texts, film, and tourism advertisements.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I create activities that ask students to closely read literary and visual materials through analytics like race, gender, and postcolonialism. In the most recent iteration of this unit, I have asked students to do all of the aforementioned tasks as well as to be producers of visual materials that allow them to deconstruct the Caribbean as paradise with Black feminist writing as a model.

To begin the unit, I assign Angelique Nixon's (2015) introduction to *Resisting Paradise: Tourism, Diaspora and Sexuality in Caribbean Culture*. Nixon establishes the historical processes by which "the metaphor and mythology of paradise continue to powerfully determine representations of the Caribbean as a region and space within popular culture and the global tourist industry" (3). Additionally, Nixon identifies and analyzes the works of writers and artists within and outside of the Caribbean that "resists paradise," which she defines as "exposing the lie and burden of creating and sustaining notions of paradise for tourism and the extent to which this drastically affects people, culture, and identity across the region" (4). While resisting the trope of paradise can manifest in various ways, Nixon explains that the two central elements to this resistance are the "creation of alternative models of tourism that are less exploitative and rooted in African diasporic identity and cultural practices" and the "representation of exploitative tourism and consumption (in terms of economy, politics, culture and sex)" (4). The students and I review Nixon's history of Caribbean as paradise trope and her conceptualization of resisting paradise before we apply those ideas in close reading exercises of "It's Better in the Bahamas" tourism advertisements in *Essence* magazine from the 1980s.

Appearing in *Essence* as early as the 1970s, "It's Better" advertisements most commonly featured Black, seemingly heterosexual, couples on empty beaches, in hotel casinos, or mingling with White tourists. The text of these advertisements frequently highlighted that there is so much to do in the Bahamas—fish, sail, golf, purchase gifts, "paint the town red," and so on—"all for so very few dollars" ("Advertisement: Bahamas" 1983, 12).<sup>2</sup> Before having students closely read the advertisements, I contextualize *Essence* magazine's emergence and its history as a publication geared specifically toward a Black women readership. As students read the advertisements, I ask them to refer back to Nixon's claims about the persistence of the Caribbean as paradise trope and consider what visual and textual markers suggests that the Bahamas are paradise. And for whom is the Bahamas paradise? What does the advertisement tell or not tell us about the Bahamas—culturally, politically, or economically? In their analysis, students frequently point out distinctions between Americans and Bahamians based on clothing, with the former dressed in leisure wear and the latter dressed in professional uniforms if and when they are present. Students also highlight how these advertisements' text quite literally present the Bahamas as for sale to its Black readership and provide no information on Bahamian culture, history, or political economy. Students often express discomfort with the characterization

of the Bahamas and Black Bahamian tourist industry workers in the magazine *Essence*, especially because of *Essence's* status as publication for Black women. This discomfort proves pedagogically useful as it provides an opening to discuss the tethering of Black leisure travel to neocolonial discourse.

After analyzing and discussing the advertisements in class, I assign Jordan's "Report" to give an example of the second possibility for resisting paradise. I provide biographical information about Jordan, her commitments to Black feminist thought, and some of the major themes in her essays and poetry, including the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in Black women's lives and national and international critiques of imperial structures and state power. I additionally detail Jordan's relationship to *Essence* as a frequent contributor throughout the 1970s and 1980s as part of a Black feminist intellectual tradition that does not limit intellectual work to the halls of academia. In the class discussion of Jordan's essay, I ask students to identify who experiences the Bahamas as paradise in the piece, who doesn't, and why or why not. Students immediately point out Jordan's depiction of exchanges between Black Bahamian women working the straw market and Black and White American tourists. "No matter that these other Black women incessantly weave words and flowers into the straw hats and bags piled beside them on the burning, dusty street," Jordan explains, or that they "work their sense of beauty into these things that we will take away as cheaply as we dare, or they will do without food" (2003, 7). Students identify Jordan's use of imagery in her description of the Afro-Bahamian women's labor, imagery that is invisible in the "It's Better" advertisements yet somehow constantly available for consumption "for so few dollars" for the Black and White tourists. Moreover, students point out, as Jordan does, that because of their American identity, Jordan and her fellow travelers have privileges and power that do not extend to the Afro-Bahamian women in the straw market.<sup>3</sup> In addition, students also highlight Jordan's relationship, or lack thereof, to Olive, a Black woman who works in the Sheraton British Colonial Hotel and cleans Jordan's room. Jordan and Olive never have an actual conversation, but Jordan imagines how Olive would respond to Jordan's choice to stay in a multinational hotel and the disproportionate power dynamics that exist between them as a result of Jordan's decision to stay at the hotel despite Olive and Jordan sharing similar racial and gender identities. Most startling to students is Jordan's suggestion that even though she and Olive live inside a conflict that neither of them created—racism, sexism, empire, and so on—she [Jordan] "may be one of the monsters that she [Olive] needs to eliminate from her universe" and vice versa (14).

Jordan's concluding provocation combined with the "It's Better" advertisements in *Essence* have led to a similar set of questions over the years: Are we / Am I a monster[s] for being a tourist[s] in the Caribbean? Don't Black people have a right to experience joyful and pleasurable travel after having historically suffered from forced migrations? Should Black people just not travel then?

These questions allow us as class to name and critically deconstruct many of the assumptions that students have about Black leisure travel. First, oftentimes when students use the term “Black people,” what they actually mean is Black Americans or African Americans. I stress the importance of attending carefully to the multiplicity of Black experiences that Jordan offers, arguing that joy, pleasure, travel, and leisure are not evenly applicable or equitably experienced by Black women across the Black diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Black American leisure travel is not inherently unproblematic or revolutionary, but rather, Black Americans’ international leisure travel is structured by US imperial logics that rely on the creation of a class of people “whose lives are unprotectable, whose social and political statuses are so negligible that they do not merit recognition or protection” (Hong 2015, 17). In the context of Jordan’s essay, that class is Black Bahamian women. Lastly, I encourage students to consider how images of Black and White Americans consuming the Caribbean together in tourism advertisements, being served and waited on by smiling Black Bahamian tourist-industry workers, falsely suggest that domestic anti-Black racism and global imperialism are relics of the past.

### Resisting Paradise Advertisement Assignment

Instead of attempting to assuage some of my students’ guilt and foreclosing critical consideration of how race, gender, nationality, and empire contribute to access to leisure, I created the “Resisting Paradise Advertisement” activity to provide students with the opportunity to answer their own questions with creativity and knowledge production. The assignment prompts students to think about what a Black leisure travel experience that resists paradise might look like. More specifically, how can knowledge of Black women’s various experiences of leisure, and the lack thereof, create alternative narratives and practices of Black leisure travel that don’t traffic in exceptionalism and neocolonialism?

With the insights from Nixon’s introduction, the *Essence* tourism advertisements and Jordan’s essay, I ask students to create an alternative to the “It’s Better” tourism advertisements that resists conventional representations of the Caribbean as an “Edenic” paradise where Afro-Caribbeans eagerly await American tourists and happily serve them, instead asking them to create ads that challenge narratives of Black American exceptionalism. The advertisement must show visible influence from both Nixon’s work and Jordan’s essay and must be made for a travel blog or social media page. In addition to the actual advertisement, students are required to include a minimum five-hundred-word explanation of how they put the advertisement together (theme of the advertisement, sources of images used in the ad, slogans they might have come up with, etc.) and how the advertisement challenges colonial representations of the Bahamas.

The students who completed this assignment in the Traveling while Black course this past spring created slogans like “It Isn’t Better for Everyone in the

Bahamas” or “The Bahamas: More Than Beaches.” In the former advertisement, the student highlighted the dismal working conditions of Black women in the straw market in Jordan’s essay and dissuaded travelers from bargaining for lower prices for straw market goods. In the latter example, the student advertised Clifton Heritage National Park to highlight Bahamian national history, challenging the absence of national history that the empty beach image suggests. One student opted not use any images of people in her advertisement, pointing out the lack of Bahamian people’s consent to and compensation for appearing in tourism advertisements, and instead chose to create a bulleted list of how to travel more ethically, including avoiding multinational hotels and discouraging tourists from taking photos of Bahamian people without their permission for Instagram likes. To be clear, I do not suggest to students that individual decisions, like avoiding multinational hotels or not posting pictures of Bahamian people without their consent, completely neutralize the neocolonial qualities of the tourism industry in the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Instead, similar to Jordan and using her work as model, I encourage students to critique neoliberal models of individual success and leisure that purport to be evidence of racial progress domestically to the detriment of critiques of US empire and hegemonic formations within the African diaspora.

Returning to Jordan’s “Report” in the contemporary classroom, alongside “It’s Better” advertisements from *Essence* and Angelique Nixon’s work, illustrates to students the “very specific critique of imperialism” that Black women writers offer (Davies 1994, 18). For Jordan, that critique of empire includes acknowledging the ways in which US empire, to quote Erica Edwards (2015, 143), utilizes “productive discourses of black women’s inclusion, reformation and exemplarity” to buttress and fortify the imperial project. But beyond merely acknowledging that strategy, Jordan’s work asks students to reevaluate the rubrics by which they measure and define freedom itself: “My ‘rights’ and my ‘freedom’ and my ‘desire’ and a slew of other New World Values; what would they sound like to this Black woman described on the card atop my hotel bureau as ‘Olive the Maid’?” (2003, 8). Moreover, Jordan’s willingness to critically engage—rather than disregard—instances of diasporic tensions rooted in the inclusion of Black Americans in imperial projects via the multinational tourist industry “mark[s] the work of [an] artist[s] who represent[s] alternatives to colonial nationalism [and] gendered forms of affinity” (Ellis 2015, 3). In revisiting June Jordan’s classic essay, I invite students to resist neoliberal seductions of exceptionalism and leisure and reach for new language and genres that reckon with the contradictions and potentials of various Black mobilities.

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## Notes

1. With respect to literary texts and film, in the past I have included Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and scenes from films such as *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and *Life and Debt*.

2. For a discussion of how contemporary images of the Bahamas and Jamaica as paradise are rooted in the islands' nineteenth-century tourism industry, see Thompson 2007.

3. For a history of the straw market woman in tourist literature and the exploitation of Black women laborers in the straw market as part of the neoliberalization of the Caribbean in the 1980s, see Strachan (2002) and Alexander (2006).

4. Bianca Williams addresses the limits of Black American women's transnational pursuit of happiness in Jamaica via Girlfriend Tours International (GFT). In her multi-sited ethnography, she explains that while Black American women traveled to Jamaica, in part, to momentarily escape racism in the United States and pursue wellness and joy, they "had a harder time seeing how they contributed to the oppression and exploitation of Jamaicans through tourist practices" (2018, 88).

5. For future iterations of this unit, I hope to include speeches on tourism by Michael Manley, former prime minister of Jamaica, and Maurice Bishop, leader of the New Jewel Movement of Grenada, both of whom articulated ideas about a "new tourism" that moved away from exploitative, foreign owned models of tourism that made the region more dependent on colonial metropolises. Instead, Bishop, for example, articulated a "new tourism" that would "reflect the nature of the Grenadian revolution" and be foregrounded in the principle that "Grenadians as all Caribbean people must be recognized as controllers of their own destiny and developers of their own process" (qtd. From Pattullo 1997, 205).

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