

# Identities without Borders: June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and the Legacy of Post-Civil Rights Black Feminism

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Inspired by the achievements and struggles of the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements, black feminist writers of the 1970s and 1980s made significant contributions to the literature of social justice. Their work reimagined cultural identity as intersectional and interconnected rather than unitary, challenging conventional notions of identity as a singular expression of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or economic class. The literature of black feminism also examined the formation and negotiation of cultural identities within specific social and historical contexts, outlining the ways that some identities are privileged as normative and desirable, and other identities are marginalized as deviant and undesirable. Black feminist literature of this period spans literary genres, but nonfiction prose—essays, memoir, and cultural analysis—proved especially useful for giving voice to personal and collective histories of resistance, survival, and self-love.

Black feminist texts from this era challenge the assumption that black experience is essentially comparable across sex and gender differences. Landmark texts by Frances Beale (“Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” 1970); Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1983); Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*, 1984); and June Jordan (*On Call: Political Essays*, 1985) sought to convey and affirm the distinctive inner life and political history of black women. Other influential works such as Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Jordan's *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union* (1992) have endured as definitive statements in the black feminist tradition. Collectively, these texts articulate and refine several concepts that are now commonplaces in the language of social justice. This includes the key concept

of intersectionality, which legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has prominently used to reference ways that “women of color are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds” (1250) due to multiple elements of their identity.

Black feminist writing from this period is also notable for its critical examination of gender identity within the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: Civil Rights, Black Power, Women’s Liberation, and the New Left. These movements made important contributions to ongoing struggles against racial inequality, gender discrimination, and heterosexism, providing a cogent critique of racism, sexism, and other forms of systematic bias and overt discrimination in US society. Legislative achievements such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Title IX (a 1972 legislative action in support of sex and gender equality in educational settings) are among the signature achievements inspired by these movements. However, while the publicly stated goals of 1960s and 1970s social movements usually supported equality and justice for all, patterns of discrimination and bias against marginalized identities were not consistently identified and addressed, neither in the movements themselves nor in the models for social change being advocated. Black feminism of the 1970s and 1980s frequently addresses these failures of insight among the movements and their participants.

Building on the feminist maxim that the “personal is political,” June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker frequently used autobiographical approaches to examine the impact of racism and sexism on black women’s lives, starting with experiences during formative years. Their recollections of childhood experiences in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s indicate how the inner lives of black mothers and grandmothers were shaped by racial inequality, with their children left to decide how to cope with memories of legally sanctioned racism and its enduring psychological and economic consequences. Occasionally, black feminists frame the struggle for racial equality in grandiose historical terms, but as these writers depict their own family histories, the reader is encouraged to appreciate small but crucial victories by black women in their

private lives. This is reflected in Audre Lorde's declaration that "survival is the greatest gift of love" (*Sister Outsider* 150), since survival constitutes a method of preserving hope in settings where opportunities to thrive are few.

### **June Jordan: Parental Legacies, Racism, and the American Dream**

The effects of racism on childhood, motherhood, and sex/gender systems emerge as a theme in June Jordan's essays, such as "Many Rivers to Cross" (originally printed in *On Call: Political Essays*, 1985). Born in 1936 in Harlem, NYC, Jordan wrote with regret and admiration as she recalls her Jamaican-born parents' determination to succeed economically in the United States while struggling emotionally in a tense marriage. Jordan reflects on her mother's personal legacy (including her mother's death by suicide), describing her as "a woman whose death you cannot possibly pinpoint because she died so many, many times" (*Some of Us* 241). In a dramatically crafted recreation of her mother's death scene, Jordan's father seeks out June after finding his wife unresponsive, needing to know whether she is alive or dead, unwilling or unable to make this determination himself (237). Jordan declined in this essay to speak sentimentally about the circumstances of her mother's passing, explaining that "I don't see why it's a good thing when you give up, or when you cooperate with those who hate you or when you polish and iron and mend and endlessly mollify for the sake of people who love the way that you kill yourself day to day silently" (240). These observations affirm the importance of resisting affronts to one's life and dignity, including affronts that originate from one's own family.

In another essay reflecting on childhood, "For My American Family" (from *Technical Difficulties*), Jordan's observations about her parents are more empathic. This essay distinguishes between institutional racism and individual choice by vividly describing denial of opportunities that stunted her immigrant parents' pursuit of material success and cultural belonging in a new land. Jordan recalls her father's enthusiasm for home decoration and aesthetic beauty;

he would decorate the family home in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn with fresh-cut roses and bowls of fruit, using light from the venetian blinds to create a still-life visual effect. Jordan writes about the heroism of these efforts in a difficult urban neighborhood: “Besides the fruit and the flowers of my father’s aesthetic preoccupation, and just beyond those narrow brownstone dining-room windows there was a burly mix of unpredictable street life that he could not control” (*Some of Us* 138), an environment that presented Jordan herself with challenges to her safety.

Recalling the economic difficulties and social isolation that persisted long after her parents’ emigration to the United States in the 1920s, Jordan writes: “It is a sad thing to consider that this country has given its least to those who have loved it the most” (*Some of Us* 138). In view of her parents’ origins in a mountain village in Jamaica, a village of dense vegetation, wooden cabins, dirt floors but no windowpanes or screens, and her father’s unforgettable memories of “the ridicule his ragged clothing provoked in school” (139), Jordan describes a family influenced by patriotic belief in American possibilities. A robust work ethic and a commitment to self-education enabled Jordan’s father to move from virtual illiteracy to voracious readership of printed material; her mother worked for many years in domestic service to help sustain the family through this unglamorous but steady labor. Still, Jordan notes the absence of “even one utterance of disappointment, or bitterness, with America” (139), despite the impact of racial inequality on their lives.

### **Audre Lorde: Early Encounters with Otherness and Difference**

Audre Lorde was a child of West Indian parents with roots in Grenada, Barbados, and Carriacou—a small island that Lorde never saw marked in an atlas until she was twenty-six (*Zami* 14). Lorde’s birthplace was New York City, 1934 (two years before the birth of June Jordan); the community of Harlem became her first home. Having endured difficult conditions as immigrants arriving in 1924, Lorde’s parents initially anticipated a return to the West Indies, but the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the onset of the Great

Depression made it financially impossible to return. Lorde reports that her father avoided conversations about the West Indies because they “made him sad, and weakened his resolve to make a kingdom in this new world” (*Zami* 12).

The West Indies came alive, however, in stories told by Lorde’s mother, Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde, who spoke of the vegetation and smells of her former home, “about plants that healed and about plants that drove you crazy, and none of it made much sense to us children because we had never seen any of them” (*Zami* 13). Observing her mother’s relationship with her father, Lorde also developed an appreciation for distinctions between the sexes, regarding her mother as a *powerful woman*, at a time when “that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost inexpressible in the white american common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black” (15).

Her mother’s support helped Lorde to manage challenging health conditions, including extreme nearsightedness and a speech impediment. By age four, Lorde had acquired both reading and speech, and she soon decided to drop the *y* from her given name (Audrey) to make her first name parallel to her last name in length (*Zami* 21-24). However, Lorde also describes the difficulties caused by silences surrounding black racial identity and its meanings for her community and herself. As described in “Eye to Eye,” an essay from *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde’s parents tended to hide “any newspaper or magazine article that dealt with ‘jim crow’ or ‘lynchings’ or ‘discrimination’” (*Sister Outsider* 139). Her parents sought to shelter Lorde from racism’s immediate effects, but these actions created a pattern of silence on racial issues. Lorde reports that her parents “never talked about color” (*Sister Outsider* 149), not even in response to instances of colorism that affected how members of her household were treated. Lorde recalls how her lighter-skinned sisters were perceived as “good looking,” while Lorde was castigated as “dark. Bad, mischievous, a born troublemaker if ever there was one” (*Sister Outsider* 149). Over the years, household silences on

racial issues contributed to “isolation, fury, mistrust, self-rejection, and sadness” (*Sister Outsider* 149).

Lorde’s descriptions of her childhood also mention tools for self-love and survival that she inherited from her mother (*Sister Outsider* 150). Lorde writes empathically about elements of her mother’s physical mystique; the “warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace” (*Zami* 33). Lorde expresses admiration for her mother’s tenacity and pride in the face of obstacles, “the presence and self-possession with which she carried herself” (*Zami* 16), despite the difficulties in nurturing a daughter “in an environment where my life was not a high priority” (*Sister Outsider* 149).

### **Alice Walker: Racism, Feminism, and Southern Culture**

The youngest of these three black feminist icons (born in 1944), Alice Walker is a native of the American South. Walker was born in central Georgia near Milledgeville, a community that is also home to Flannery O’Connor, a white Southern writer whose prose fiction frequently explores racial themes. A descendent of formerly enslaved people who were still contending with a plantation-based, sharecropping economy, Alice Walker was no stranger to conversations and conflicts over race and racism. She witnessed frequent and overt resistance to white supremacy by her mother, whose approachable demeanor would shift to vigorous anger “when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest that her children did not need to go to school” (*In Search of* 238). Not all her mother’s actions resisted the ideology of white supremacy, however. After the purchase of the family’s first television set in 1960, Walker recognized her mother’s internalized racism. Seeing her mother’s response to the glamorous lives of white actors on soap operas and other shows, Walker observed that her mother “subordinated her soul to theirs and became a faithful and timid supporter of ‘Beautiful White People.’ Once she asked me, in a moment of vicarious pride and despair, if I didn’t think that ‘they’ were ‘jest naturally smarter, prettier, better’” (*In Search of* 123).

Such experiences inspired Walker to use nonfiction essays and fiction to explore the inner journeys of black women who toiled under slavery and segregation, occupying social strata that offered little protection from violence meted out by whites or by black men within their own families and communities. In the title essay from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker urges readers to acknowledge the inhumanity of racism and sexism that could stunt, redirect, but never fully contain the artistic and intellectual life of black women:

Did you have a genius of a great great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunset or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)—eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children—when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay? (233)

From roots in economically vulnerable families who suffered greatly in a white supremacist social system, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker would each forge a writing career that advocated for and critically examined the rationale, strategies, and outcomes of movements for social justice.

### **June Jordan: Expanding the Scope of Post-Civil Rights Black Feminism**

In addition to examining lessons and legacies of 1960s and 1970s social movements, black feminist writing of the 1980s and 1990s provided commentary on trends in national and international politics. For June Jordan, this meant articulating a case for black feminist resistance in the age of President Ronald Reagan, a time when the rise of neoconservative politics intensified the disparagement of black women as welfare queens and crack mothers. Jordan's 1981 essay "Civil Wars" examines the transition from intensively activist politics of the 1960s to less confrontational organizational strategies

of the late 1970s and 1980s, a time when support for mass protest and other direct action seemed to wane. Jordan writes that

...the lobby for polite behavior is fairly inescapable. Most often, the people who can least afford to further efface and deny the truth of what they experience, the people whose very existence is most endangered and, therefore, most in need of vigilantly truthful affirmation, these are the people—the poor and the children—who are punished most severely for departures from the civilities that grease oppression (*Some of Us* 258).

Jordan's prose stylistics draw from black vernacular dialect through the use of street-influenced and church-influenced forms to convey relevancy and urgency. Her use of dialect is a method of breaking silences and challenging the exclusion of marginalized people from decision-making processes.

"Where Is the Love," another essay that was first published in 1981, explores the theme of self-love and its transformative possibilities for black women whose lives have been undervalued due to sexism, white supremacy, and economic marginalization under global capitalism. Contemporary black feminist Jennifer C. Nash describes Jordan's approach in this essay as black-feminist love politics, a philosophy with the goal not only of "claiming, embracing, and restoring the wounded black female self," but also of "moving beyond the limits of selfhood" (Nash 3). In this spirit, Jordan describes the ultimate potential for self-love to enable her to "gain and gain and gain in the socio-psychic strength needed so that I may, without fear, be able and willing to love and respect women, for example, who are not like me: women who are not feminists, women who are not professionals, women who are not as old or as young as I am, women who have neither job nor income, women who are not Black" (*Some of Us* 271). Jordan's aim is to expand the circle of care and concern to all women, embracing "more and more of the whole world, without fear, and also without self-sacrifice" (271).

Responding to silences around black lesbian and black bisexual identity in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left, Jordan

asserts that consensual physical expressions of love are legitimate and essential aims of an effective social justice movement. This theme is developed in “A New Politics of Sexuality,” a 1992 essay that originally appears in her collection *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union*: “If you can finally go to the bathroom wherever you can find one, if you can finally order a cup of coffee and drink it wherever coffee is available, but you cannot follow your heart—you cannot respect the career of your own honest body in the world—then how much of what kind of freedom does any one of us possess?” (*Some of Us* 133). The passage demonstrates that Jordan’s vision of self-love is political as well as personal.

Jordan uses the concept of intersectionality to rethink the relationship between sexualities and movements for social justice, examining gender politics among black activists and black communities. In “I Am Seeking an Attitude” (originally published in *Affirmative Acts*, 1998), Jordan rejects the “false choice between unconditional loyalty to our men (themselves despised by white men) and our own need to escape from despicable ‘bitch’ status and treatment” (*Some of Us* 96).

As she entered her most productive professional period of the 1980s and 1990s, Jordan lent her activist voice to many initiatives for social change—antiapartheid, breast cancer awareness, opposition to US military involvement in Latin America and the Middle East. Her range of interests and insights bear out her commitment to intersectionality, as she expressed in “A New Politics of Sexuality”:

And no, I do not believe it is blasphemous to compare oppressions of sexuality to oppressions of race and ethnicity. Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all besides sloganeering and temporary, short-sighted, and short-lived advancement for a few. Freedom is indivisible, and either we are working for freedom or you are working for the sake of your self-interests and I am working for mine. (*Some of Us* 133)

This spirit of inclusion and deep respect for all identities also informs Jordan’s essay in response to the horrific death of Daniel Pearl, a journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* who was kidnapped

and murdered by terrorists in Pakistan a few months after 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan. In a videotaped statement made shortly before he was killed by beheading, Pearl was pressured by his captors to mention his Jewish identity. Jordan's 2002 essay "Letter to a Friend" was written to a former classmate of Daniel Pearl. The essay addresses extremely difficult subjects—the personal nature of tragedy when one moves beyond the news cycle, the valuing of some lives over others in public policy, the moral hazard of killing for revenge. Her final words in the essay are an apt summary of her belief in the interconnectedness of humanity:

My heart is sick from all the demonic machinations neither one of us would ever advocate or condone. Your Danny is dead. And how can we honor his heroic wish: "to change the world?" I have no simple answers. But perhaps our willingness to listen and to say all that we know, and to feel—all that we dare—perhaps that will help us to build something better than what we can, even now, imagine. (*Some of Us* 51)

### **Audre Lorde and Intersectionality: Examining Race, Sexuality, Social Class, and Age**

Audre Lorde's most productive years parallel those of June Jordan, with Lorde's career in poetry commencing in the late 1960s. Early in her career, Lorde developed a productive relationship with Broadside Press in Detroit, an independent black publishing company that also collaborated with the likes of Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and other major voices of the Civil Rights and Black Power era. Lorde's prose writing took center stage in the 1980s with the publication of *The Cancer Journals* (1980), a reflection on her journey through illness, wellness, and treatment; *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), which she described as a "biomythography"; and *Sister Outsider* (1984), a collection of essays and speeches. Lorde's key themes included formative experiences as a lesbian in social contexts that varied from extremely homophobic settings to minimally tolerant but confining urban underground scenes. In *Zami*, Lorde looks back to her young adulthood in New York City to recapture the feeling of being a young lesbian woman