

Where Is The Love?

June Jordan

I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black. It means that I must undertake to love myself and respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect. It means that I must seek to cleanse myself of the hatred and contempt that surround and permeate my identity as a woman and as a Black human being in this world. It means that the achievement of self-love and self-respect will require hourly vigilance. It means that I am entering my soul in a struggle that will most certainly transform all the peoples of the earth: the movement into self-love, self-respect and self-determination is the movement now galvanizing the true majority of human beings everywhere.

This movement tests the viability of a moral idea: that the legitimacy of any status quo, any governing force, must be measured according to the experience of those who are, comparatively, powerless. The conduct of the strong vis à vis the strong tells us nothing about a society. The truth is found instead in the behavior of the powerful toward those who are weaker, different, smaller. How do the strong, the powerful, treat children? How do they treat the aged among us? How do the strong and the powerful treat so-called minority members of society? How do the powerful regard women: how do they treat us?

You can see that, according to these criteria, the overwhelming status quo of power and government and tradition is evil, diseased, illegitimate and deserves nothing from us—no loyalty, no accommodation, no patience, no understanding—nothing but clear-minded resolve to utterly change this situation and thereby change our own destiny.

As a Black woman I exist as part of the powerless and as part of the majority peoples of the world. I am powerless compared to any man because women are kept powerless by men. I am powerless compared to anyone white because Black and Third World peoples are kept powerless by whites. And because I am Black and a woman I am the most victimized of the powerless. Yet I am the majority because women constitute the majority gender. I am the majority because Black and Third World peoples constitute the majority of human beings. In short, I am a member of the most powerless majority on the planet.

And it is here—in this extreme coincidence of my status as someone twice stigmatized, my status as someone twice kin to the despised majority—it is here, in this extremity, that I stand in a struggle against demoralization and suicide and toward self-love and self-determination. And it is here, in this extremity, that as a Black feminist I ask myself and anyone who would call me sister, *Where is the love?*

The love growing out of my quest for self-love, self-respect and self-determination must be something one can verify in the ways I present myself to others, the ways I approach people different from myself: How do I reach out to the people I would like to call my sisters, brothers, children, lovers and friends? If I am a Black feminist serious in undertaking self-love, it seems to me that I should gain and gain and gain in strength so that I may without fear be able and willing to love and respect, for example, women who are not feminists, not professionals, not as old or as young as I am, women who have neither job nor income, women who are not Black.

And it seems to me that the strength that should come from Black feminism means that I can, without fear, love and respect all men who are willing and able, without fear, to love and respect me. In short, if acquiring my self-determination is part of a worldwide, inevitable and righteous movement, then I should be willing and able to embrace more and more of the whole world without fear and also without self-sacrifice.

This means that as a Black feminist I cannot be expected to respect what somebody else calls self-love if that concept of self-love requires my self-destruction to any degree. This holds true whether that somebody else is male, female, Black or white. My Black feminism means that you cannot expect me to respect what somebody else identifies as the Good of the People if that so-called Good (often translated as *manhood* or *family* or *nationalism*) requires the deferral or the diminution of my self-fulfillment. We, Blacks and women, are the people. And, as Black women, we are most of the people, any people. Therefore, nothing that is good for the people is actually good unless it is good for me and my people, as I, as we, determine our own lives.

When I speak of Black feminism, I am speaking from an intense consciousness of the truth that we Black women huddle together miserably on the very lowest levels of the economic pyramid. We Black women subsist in the most tenuous economic conditions.

When I speak of Black feminism then, I am not speaking of sexuality; I am not speaking of heterosexuality or homosexuality or bisexuality. Whatever sexuality anyone elects is not my business or the business of the state. Furthermore, I cannot be persuaded that one kind of sexuality will necessarily bring greater happiness to the two people involved. I am not talking about sexuality; I am talking about love, about a deep caring and respect for every other human being, a love that can only derive from secure and positive self-love.

As a Black woman and feminist, I must look about me, with trembling and with shocked anger, at the endless waste, the endless suffocation of my sisters; the bitter sufferings of hundreds of thousands of women who are the sole parents of hundreds of thousands of children, the desolation of women trapped by futile, demeaning, low-paying occupations, the unemployed, the bullied, the beaten, the battered, the ridiculed, the slandered, the trivialized, the raped and the sterilized; the lost millions

of beautiful, creative and momentous lives turned to ashes on the pyre of gender identity. I must look about me and, as a Black feminist, I must ask myself: *Where is the love?* How is my own life work serving to end these tyrannies, these corrosions of sacred possibility? How am I earning membership in our worldwide movement for self-determination and self-respect?

As a Black feminist poet and writer I must look behind me with trembling and with shocked anger at the fate of Black women writers. From the terrible graves of the traditional conspiracy against my sisters in art, I must exhume the works of writers and poets such as Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gladys May Caseley-Hayford and Gwendolyn B. Bennett.

Can any of you name two or three other women poets from the Harlem Renaissance? Or, for that matter, how well-known is the work of Margaret Walker, a most signal contemporary of Richard Wright? Why does the work of all women die with no river carrying forward the record of such grace? How is it that whether we have written novels or poetry, whether we have raised our children or cleaned and cooked and washed and ironed, it is all dismissed as "women's work"; it is all, finally, despised as nothing important, and there is no trace, no meaning echo of our days upon the earth?

Here is Georgia Douglas Johnson's poem, "The Heart of A Woman":

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lovebird, softwinging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars,
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

It is against such sorrow, such spiritual death, such deliberate strangulation of the lives of women, my sisters, and of powerless peoples—men and women—everywhere, that I work and live, now, as a feminist, trusting that I will learn to love myself well enough to love you (whoever you are), well enough so that you will love me well enough so that we will know, exactly, where is the love: that it is here, between us, and growing stronger and growing stronger.

From *Essence*

This article is an edited version of the opening address delivered by Ms. Jordan on May 4, 1978, as part of the panel on Black Women Writers and Feminism at the National Black Writers' Conference held at Howard University, Washington, D.C.