

GENDER

GENDER RACISM: A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequity between race-genders and are substantiated by racist ideas about race-genders.

GENDER ANTIRACISM: A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between race-genders and are substantiated by anti-racist ideas about race-genders.

NO ONE OVERLOOKED the sheer size of her intellect, which was even more immediately apparent than her tall, full build and striking makeup. No one overlooked Kaila at all. She did not tuck away a single aspect of herself by the time I met her at Temple. No self-censoring. No closeting of her lesbian feminism in a Black space that could be antagonizing to lesbianism and feminism. No ambiguity for misinterpretation. All badass Joan Morgan “chickenhead” giving no fucks. All warrior poet giving all fucks, like her idol, Audre Lorde. Kaila was entirely herself, and her Laila Ali intellect wished for the world to voice a problem with what they saw.

Kaila had no problem telling you about yourself. Her legendary impersonations of African American studies students and faculty were as funny as they were accurate. I always wanted her to do an impersonation of me, but I was too scared and insecure to see what she saw.

Kaila held court with Yaba, whose roaring, full-bodied laughter often filled the room. Their back-and-forth jokes were as bad for victims as Venus and Serena Williams’s matches were bad for

tennis balls. When I sat down for a long talk—or, rather, to listen and learn—my mouth seemed to always be open, in laughter at their jokes or jaw-dropping wonder over their insights. They sat as the royal court of African American studies graduate students. Everyone feared or respected or battled them. I feared and respected them, too scared and awed to battle.

Yaba's irrepressible Blackness governed our Blacker-than-thou space. Blacker than thou not because of her Ghanaian features, her down-home New Orleans air, or her mixes of African garb and African American fashion. Not because she danced as comfortably to the beat of West Indian cultures as she did to her own. She seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of Black people: the most ethnically antiracist person in my new world. As up to date on Black American popular culture as African politics, as equipped to debate the intricacies of the rise of Beyoncé as she could the third rise of Black feminism, as comfortable explaining the origins of Haitian Creole as the conflicts between the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria. I always felt so ignorant around her.

I ARRIVED AT Temple as a racist, sexist homophobe. Not exactly friend material for these two women. But they saw the potential in me I did not see in myself.

My ideas of gender and sexuality reflected those of my parents. They did not raise me not to be a homophobe. They rarely talked about gay and lesbian people. Ideas often dance a cappella. Their silence erased queer existence as thoroughly as integrationists erased the reality of integrated White spaces.

On gender, Dad's perception of masculine strength did not derive from the perceived weakness of women. Maybe because Ma made no bones about her strength. She'd weight-lifted ever since I could remember. She carried heavy bags into the house, letting the three six-footers she lived with know that even at five foot three and 120 pounds, she was no physical slouch. Dad had always been more emotional and affectionate than Ma. Dad comforted my brother and me when we got hurt. Ma told us to suck

archs, from White social scientists to Black husbands, demanded the submission of Black women to uplift the race. A command in *Ebony* magazine became popular: The “immediate goal of the Negro woman today should be the establishment of a strong family unit in which the father is the dominant person.” A decade later, Black patriarchs and White social scientists were still touting the idea that Black men had it worse than Black women. Racism had “clearly” and “largely focused” on the Black male, sociologist Charles Herbert Stember argued in his 1976 book, *Sexual Racism: The Emotional Barrier to an Integrated Society*. An America of integrated (White) spaces had not been achieved because at racism’s core was the “sexual rejection of the racial minority, the conscious attempt on the part of the majority to prevent interracial cohabitation,” he wrote. The White man’s sexual jealousy of the Black man was the key.

For too many Black men, the Black Power movement that emerged after the Moynihan report became a struggle against White men for Black power over Black women. Dad witnessed this power struggle, after being raised by a single Black mother who never called him or his brother the head of the household, like other patriarchal single moms did. One day in 1969, Dad had been singing inside a storefront church. He stepped outside for air and confronted a Black Panther assaulting his girlfriend. On another day, in the summer of 1971, Dad and a girlfriend before Ma ventured up to the Harlem Temple of the Nation of Islam. The Nation had piqued Dad’s interest. They were eating with one of the ministers. Dad’s girlfriend said something. The minister smacked her and smacked from his mouth, “Women are not to speak in the presence of men.” Dad sprang out of his chair and had to be restrained and strong-armed out of the temple.

In spite of everything, Dad and Ma could not help but join the interracial force policing the sexuality of young Black mothers. They were two of the millions of liberals and conservatives aghast at the growing percentage of Black children being born into single-parent households in the 1970s and 1980s—aghast

even though my dad turned out just fine. The panic around the reported numbers of single-parent households was based on a host of faulty or untested premises: that two bad parents would be better than one good one, that the presence of an abusive Black father is better for the child than his absence, that having a second income for a child trumps all other factors, that all of the single parents were Black women, that none of these absent fathers were in prison or the grave, that Black mothers never hid the presence of Black fathers in their household to keep their welfare for the child.

In time for the midterm elections in 1994, political scientist Charles Murray made sure Americans knew the percentage of Black children born into single-parent households "has now reached 68 percent." Murray blamed the "welfare system." My parents and other liberals blamed sexual irresponsibility, a shameful disregard for the opportunities born of 1960s activism, pathologizing poverty, and a disconnect from the premarital abstinence of Christ. They were all wrong on so many levels. The increasing percentage of Black babies born into single-parent households was not due to single Black mothers having more children but to married Black women having fewer children over the course of the twentieth century. Ma could see that decline in her family. Ma's married paternal grandmother had sixteen children in the 1910s and 1920s. Ma's married mother had six children in the 1940s and 1950s. My mother had two children in the early 1980s—as did two of her three married sisters.

Ma and Dad and countless Americans were disconnected from racial reality and leapt to demonize this class of single mothers. Only Black feminists like Dorothy Roberts and Angela Davis defended them.

ON OTHER ISSUES, Ma sometimes put up a feminist defense. It was early August 1976, the Tuesday before the Saturday my parents were scheduled to wed. Running down the ceremony, Pas-

tor Wilfred Quinby recited the Christian wedding vows for my parents. "Husbands, love your wives, and wives, obey your husbands."

"I'm not obeying him!" Ma interjected. "What!" Pastor Quinby said in shock, turning to look at my father. "What!" Dad said, turning to look at my mother.

"The only man I obeyed was my father, when I was a child," she nearly shouted, staring into Dad's wide eyes. "You are not my father and I'm not a child!"

The clock was ticking. Would Dad whip out Bible verses on women's submission and fight for the sexist idea? Would he crawl away and look for another woman, who would submit? Dad chose a different option: the only option that could have yielded their marriage of more than four decades. He slowly picked up his jaw, popped his eyes back in their sockets, and offered Ma an equitable solution.

"How about: Are you willing to submit one to another?" he asked.

Ma nodded. She liked the sound of "one to another," integrating the Christian concept of submission with feminist equity. My parents wrote their own wedding vows. Pastor Quinby married them as scheduled.

DAD SHOULD NOT have been shocked at Ma's resistance. For some time, Ma had been rethinking Christian sexism. After they wed, Ma attended "consciousness-raising conferences" for Christian women in Queens. What Kimberly Springer calls the "Black feminist movement" had finally burst through the sexist dams of Christian churches. Black feminists rejected the prevailing Black patriarchal idea that the primary activist role of Black women was submitting to their husbands and producing more Black babies for the "Black nation." Through groups like the Black Women's Alliance (1970) and the National Black Feminist Organization (1973), through Black women's caucuses in Black power and women's liberation groups, Black feminists fought sexism in

Black spaces and racism in women's spaces. They developed their own spaces, and a Black feminist consciousness for Black women's liberation, for the liberation of humanity.

Black queer activists, too, had been marginalized after they launched the gay-liberation movement through the Stonewall rebellion in Manhattan in 1969. Braving homophobia in Black spaces and racism in queer spaces, antiracist queer people formed their own spaces. Perhaps the most antiracist queer space of the era may have also been the most antiracist feminist space of the era. In the summer of 1974, a group of Boston Black women separated from the National Black Feminist Organization to form the Combahee River Collective, named for the Combahee River slave raid of 1863 led by Harriet Tubman. They revived the unadulterated freedom politics of General Tubman. In 1977, they shared their views, in a statement drafted by Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith. The Combahee River Collective Statement embodied queer liberation, feminism, and anti-racism, like perhaps no other public statement in American history. They did not want Black women to be viewed as inferior or superior to any other group. "To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

"Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable," they wrote. "No other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority. . . . We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us." Maria Stewart, America's first feminist known to give a public address to a coed audience, considered and prioritized the specific oppression of Black women in her daring speeches in the early 1830s in Boston. So did Sojourner Truth and Frances Harper, before and after the Civil War. So did Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper, in the early 1900s. So did Frances Beal, who audaciously proclaimed in 1968, "the black woman in America can justly be described as a 'slave of a slave,'" the victim of the "double jeopardy" of racism and sexism. This position paper joined an anthology of pieces in 1970 by women like Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and a young

Mississippi prodigy named Alice Walker. Editor Toni Cade Bambara, a Rutgers literary scholar, ensured *The Black Woman* best reflected “the preoccupations of the contemporary Black woman in this country,” including setting “the record straight on the matriarch and the evil Black bitch.”

But 1991—the year Anita Hill accused U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment—proved to be the pivotal year of Black feminist scholars. They constructed terminology that named the specific oppression facing Black women, which Black feminists from Maria Stewart to Anna Julia Cooper to Angela Davis had been identifying for more than a century. Behind the scenes of what Thomas mind-bogglingly called a “high-tech lynching” and Black feminists’ frontline defense of Hill, Afro-Dutch scholar Philomena Essed worked on a project that would help define what was happening. She published her reflections on in-depth interviews she’d conducted with Black women in the United States and the Netherlands in *Understanding Everyday Racism*. “In discussing the experiences of Black women, is it sexism or is it racism?” Essed asked. “These two concepts narrowly intertwine and combine under certain conditions into one, hybrid phenomenon. Therefore, it is useful to speak of *gendered racism*.”

In 1991, UCLA critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw further explored this notion of “intersectionality.” That year, she published “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” in the *Stanford Law Review*, based on her address at the Third National Conference on Women of Color and the Law in 1990. “Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains,” Crenshaw theorized. “Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices.”

Racist (and sexist) power distinguishes race-genders, racial (or gender) groups at the intersection of race and gender. Women are

a gender. Black people are a race. When we identify Black women, we are identifying a race-gender. A sexist policy produces inequities between women and men. A racist policy produces inequities between racial groups. When a policy produces inequities between race-genders, it is gendered racism, or gender racism for short.

To be antiracist is to reject not only the hierarchy of races but of race-genders. To be feminist is to reject not only the hierarchy of genders but of race-genders. To truly be antiracist is to be feminist. To truly be feminist is to be antiracist. To be antiracist (and feminist) is to level the different race-genders, is to root the inequities between the equal race-genders in the policies of gender racism.

Gender racism was behind the growing number of involuntary sterilizations of Black women by eugenicist physicians—two hundred thousand cases in 1970, rising to seven hundred thousand in 1980. Gender racism produced the current situation of Black women with some collegiate education making less than White women with only high school degrees; Black women having to earn advanced degrees before they earn more than White women with bachelor's degrees; and the median wealth of single White women being \$42,000 compared to \$100 for single Black women. Native women and Black women experience poverty at a higher rate than any other race-gender group. Black and Latinx women still earn the least, while White and Asian men earn the most. Black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than are White women. A Black woman with an advanced degree is more likely to lose her baby than a White woman with less than an eighth-grade education. Black women remain twice as likely to be incarcerated as White women.

Gender racism impacts White women and male groups of color, whether they see it or not. White women's resistance to Black feminism and intersectional theory has been self-destructive, preventing resisters from understanding their own oppression. The intersection of racism and sexism, in some cases, oppresses

White women. For example, sexist notions of “real women” as weak and racist notions of White women as the idealized woman intersect to produce the gender-racist idea that the pinnacle of womanhood is the weak White woman. This is the gender racism that caused millions of men and women to hate the strong White woman running for president in 2016, Hillary Clinton. Or to give another example, the opposite of the gender racism of the unvirtuous hypersexual Black woman is the virtuous asexual White woman, a racial construct that has constrained and controlled the White woman’s sexuality (as it nakedly tainted the Black woman’s sexuality as un-rape-able). White-male interest in lynching Black-male rapists of White women was as much about controlling the sexuality of White women as it was about controlling the sexuality of Black men. Racist White patriarchs were re-creating the slave era all over again, making it illicit for White women to cohabit with Black men at the same time as racist White (and Black) men were raping Black women. And the slave era remains, amid the hollow cries of race pride drowning out the cries of the sexually assaulted. Gender racism is behind the thinking that when one defends White male abusers like Trump and Brett Kavanaugh one is defending White people; when one defends Black male abusers like Bill Cosby and R. Kelly one is defending Black people.

Male resistance to Black feminism and intersectional theory has been similarly self-destructive, preventing resisters from understanding our specific oppression. The intersection of racism and sexism, in some cases, oppresses men of color. Black men reinforce oppressive tropes by reinforcing certain sexist ideas. For example, sexist notions of “real men” as strong and racist notions of Black men as not really men intersect to produce the gender racism of the weak Black man, inferior to the pinnacle of manhood, the strong White man.

Sexist notions of men as more naturally dangerous than women (since women are considered naturally fragile, in need of protection) and racist notions of Black people as more dangerous than White people intersect to produce the gender racism of the

hyperdangerous Black man, more dangerous than the White man, the Black woman, and (the pinnacle of innocent frailty) the White woman. No defense is stronger than the frail tears of innocent White womanhood. No prosecution is stronger than the case for inherently guilty Black manhood. These ideas of gender racism transform every innocent Black male into a criminal and every White female criminal into Casey Anthony, the White woman a Florida jury exonerated in 2011, against all evidence, for killing her three-year-old child. White women get away with murder and Black men spend years in prisons for wrongful convictions. After the imprisonment of Black men dropped 24 percent between 2000 and 2015, Black men were still nearly six times more likely than White men, twenty-five times more likely than Black women, and fifty times more likely than White women to be incarcerated. Black men raised in the top 1 percent by millionaires are as likely to be incarcerated as White men raised in households earning \$36,000.

“CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST AND antiracist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of color,” Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote in 1991. All racial groups are a collection of intersectional identities differentiated by gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, skin color, nationality, and culture, among a series of other identifiers. Black women first recognized their own intersectional identity. Black feminists first theorized the intersection of two forms of bigotry: sexism and racism. Intersectional theory now gives all of humanity the ability to understand the intersectional oppression of their identities, from poor Latinx to Black men to White women to Native lesbians to transgender Asians. A theory for Black women is a theory for humanity. No wonder Black feminists have been saying from the beginning that when humanity becomes serious about the freedom of Black women, humanity becomes serious about the freedom of humanity.

Intersectional Black identities are subjected to what Crenshaw

described as the intersection of racism and other forms of bigotry, such as ethnocentrism, colorism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. My journey to being an antiracist first recognized the intersectionality of my ethnic racism, and then my bodily racism, and then my cultural racism, and then my color racism, and then my class racism, and, when I entered graduate school, my gender racism and queer racism.