

## SEXUALITY

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

**QUEER ANTIRACISM:** A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between race-sexualities and are substantiated by antiracist ideas about race-sexualities.

**R**ACIST (AND HOMOPHOBIC) power distinguishes race-sexualities, racial (or sexuality) groups at the intersection of race and sexuality. Homosexuals are a sexuality. Latinx people are a race. Latinx homosexuals are a race-sexuality. A homophobic policy produces inequities between heterosexuals and homosexuals. A racist policy produces inequities between racial groups. Queer racism produces inequities between race-sexualities. Queer racism produces a situation where 32 percent of children being raised by Black male same-sex couples live in poverty, compared to 14 percent of children being raised by White male same-sex couples, 13 percent of children raised by Black heterosexuals, and 7 percent of children raised by White heterosexuals. For children being raised by female same-sex couples who live in poverty, the racial disparity is nearly as wide. These children of Black queer couples are more likely to live in poverty because their parents are more likely than Black heterosexual and White queer couples to be poor.

Homophobia cannot be separated from racism. They've intersected for ages. British physician Havelock Ellis is known for

popularizing the term “homosexual.” In his first medical treatise on homosexuality, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897), he wrote about “the question of sex—with the racial questions that rest on it.” He regarded homosexuality as a congenital physiological abnormality, just as he regarded criminality at the time. Ellis adored the father of criminology, Italian physician Cesare Lombroso, who claimed criminals are born, not bred, and that people of color are by nature criminals. In 1890, Ellis published a popular summary of Lombroso’s writings.

Ellis spent many years defending against the criminalization of White homosexuality. Following racist scholars, Ellis used comparative anatomy of women’s bodies to evidence the biological differences between the sexualities. “As regards the sexual organs it seems possible,” Ellis wrote, “to speak more definitively of inverted women than of inverted men.” At the time, racist physicians were contrasting the “bound together” clitoris of “Aryan American women” that “goes with higher civilization” and the “free” clitoris “in negresses” that goes with “highly domesticated animals.” Homophobic physicians were supposing that “inverted” lesbians “will in practically every instance disclose an abnormally prominent clitoris,” wrote New York City prison doctor Perry M. Lichtenstein. Racist ideas suggesting Black people are more hypersexual than White people and homophobic ideas suggesting queer people are more hypersexual than heterosexuals intersect to produce the queer racism of the most hypersexual race-sexuality, the Black queer. Their imagined biological stamp: the abnormally prominent clitoris, which “is particularly so in colored women,” Lichtenstein added.

WECKEA WAS MY best friend at Temple. We were both brown-skinned with locs and hailed from prideful HBCUs. I usually befriended laid-back and calm people like him. He usually befriended daring and silly people like me. We were both curious by nature, but Weckea was as inquisitive a person as I had ever met. He wanted to know everything and damn near did. The

only thing he seemed to love as much as a good idea was a good laugh. He was a few years older than me, and it did not take long for me to look up to him intellectually, in the way I looked up to Kaila and Yaba.

We arrived at Temple in the same cohort—Weckea, myself, and another student, Raena. We banded together.

On a rare day when Raena and I ate lunch together without Weckea, the two of us sat outside, near campus, probably delighting in the warm arrival of spring, probably in 2006. We both had food before us. First gossip and small talk and then, out of nowhere: “You know Weckea is gay, right.” She barely looked up at me as she said it. Her eyes focused as she gobbled food.

“No, I didn’t know that,” I said, my voice breaking.

“Well, it’s not a big deal he didn’t tell you, right?”

“Right.” I looked away. Cars honked. People strolled by. An ambulance was coming. For me?

I glanced back at Raena, her chin tucked, eating. Wondering why she’d told me this. I did not see a friendly face of concern as I twitched in my chair. I saw a blankness, if not a face of satisfaction. Was she trying to break up my friendship with Weckea?

Neither of us had much to say after that. Mission accomplished on her part. Weckea’s homosexuality made sense, as I thought about it. He had never spoken about dating a woman. When I asked, he deflected. I’d chalked it up to his extreme privacy. He would describe women as pretty or not so pretty but never in a sexual manner, which I chalked up to his conservatism. He was not so conservative after all.

I thought about Black gay men running around having unprotected sex all the time. But Weckea did not seem sex-crazed or reckless. I thought about this hypersexuality and recklessness causing so many Black gay men to contract HIV. I thought wrong. Black gay men are less likely to have condomless sex than White gay men. They are less likely to use drugs like poppers or crystal methamphetamine during sex, which heighten the risk of HIV infections.

I had been around gay Black men before, in FACES, a model-

ing troupe I'd joined at FAMU. But the gay Black men in the troupe (or, better yet, the ones I thought were gay) had what I thought of as a feminine streak to them: the way they moved, their makeup, the way they struggled to dap me up. They pinged my gaydar. Everything about my modeling troupe pinged the gaydar of my friends. My modeling ended up being the only thing my friends joked on more than my orange eyes. But they thought my orange eyes were "gay," too.

I assumed Black gay men performed femininity. I did not know that some gay men, like Weckea, perform masculinity and actually prefer gay men who perform femininity for partners. I did not know (and feminists like Kaila and Yaba were teaching me) about gender being an authentic performance; that the ways women and men traditionally act are not tied to their biology; that men can authentically perform femininity as effectively as women can authentically perform masculinity. Authentically, meaning they are not acting, as the transphobic idea assumes. They are being who they are, defying society's gender conventions. I learned this, once and for all, through my other close friendship at Temple, with a butch Black lesbian from Texas. I talked about women with Monica in the way I could not with Weckea. We were drawn to the same women. When we got to joking and relating our romantic experiences, my conversations with Monica did not sound too different from my conversations with my heterosexual male friends at FAMU.

MY MIND TURNED to introspection. Why had Weckea not told me? Why didn't he feel comfortable sharing his sexuality with me? Maybe he sensed my homophobia—in fact, he probably heard it in my rhetoric. He listened intently. He seemed to never forget anything.

In subsequent years, Weckea prided himself on showing off his "gaydar," pointing out to me closeted or down-low people at Temple. But Weckea was equally adept at identifying homophobia and taking the necessary precautions. He must have been pro-

protecting himself—and our early friendship—from my homophobia. Now I had a choice: my homophobia or my best friend. I could not have both for long. I chose Weckea and the beginning of our long friendship. I chose the beginning of the rest of my lifelong striving against the homophobia of my upbringing, a lifelong striving to be a queer antiracist.

Queer antiracism is equating all the race-sexualities, striving to eliminate the inequities between the race-sexualities. We cannot be antiracist if we are homophobic or transphobic. We must continue to “affirm that all Black lives matter,” as the co-founder of Black Lives Matter, Opal Tometi, once said. All Black lives include those of poor transgender Black women, perhaps the most violated and oppressed of all the Black intersectional groups. The average U.S. life expectancy of a transgender woman of color is thirty-five years. The racial violence they face, the transphobia they face as they seek to live freely, is unfathomable. I started learning about their freedom fight from the personal stories of transgender activist Janet Mock. But I opened up to their fight on that day I opened to saving my friendship with Weckea.

I am a cisgendered Black heterosexual male—“cisgender” meaning my gender identity corresponds to my birth sex, in contrast to transgender people, whose gender identity does not correspond to their birth sex. To be queer antiracist is to understand the privileges of my cisgender, of my masculinity, of my heterosexuality, of their intersections. To be queer antiracist is to serve as an ally to transgender people, to intersex people, to women, to the non-gender-conforming, to homosexuals, to their intersections, meaning listening, learning, and being led by their equalizing ideas, by their equalizing policy campaigns, by their power struggle for equal opportunity. To be queer antiracist is to see that policies protecting Black transgender women are as critically important as policies protecting the political ascendancy of queer White males. To be queer antiracist is to see the new wave of both religious-freedom laws and voter-ID laws in Republican states as taking away the rights of queer people. To be queer antiracist is to see homophobia, racism, and queer racism—not the

queer person, not the queer space—as the problem, as abnormal, as unnatural.

THEY SEEMED TO always be there—Yaba and Kaila—sitting around one of those tables near the entrance of Gladfelter Hall, sometimes with fellow doctoral students Danielle and Sekhmet. I usually caught these women on a smoke break or lunch break or dinner break from working together in Gladfelter's computer lab. They were finishing their doctorates in African American studies, nearing the end of a journey I was beginning at Temple.

Whenever Kaila and Yaba were seated there—whenever they were anywhere—their presence was unmistakable, memorable and unsettling and inspiring. I could go to war with them at my side. I learned from them that I am not a defender of Black people if I am not sharply defending Black women, if I am not sharply defending queer Blacks. The two of them exerted their influence on our department's events. When our department brought in speakers for a public event, they came. When graduate students shared their research at an event, they came. When there was an out-of-town Black studies conference, they came. When they came, let's just say they ensured that when patriarchal ideas arose, when homophobic ideas were put out there, when racist ideas came and intersected, they would come for those ideas like piranhas coming for their daily meal. I watched, stunned, in awe of their intellectual attacks. I call them attacks, but in truth they were defenses, defending Black womanhood and the humanity of queer Blacks. They were respectful and measured if the victimizer was respectful and measured with them. But I call them attacks because I felt personally attacked. They were attacking my gender racism about Black women, my queer racism about queer Blacks, my gender and queer racism about queer Black women. I did not want to ever be their prey.

I binge-read every author they mentioned in their public exchanges and in their private exchanges with me. I gobbled up Audre Lorde, E. Patrick Johnson, bell hooks, Joan Morgan,

Dwight McBride, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw like my life depended on it. My life *did* depend on it. I wanted to overcome my gender racism, my queer racism. But I had to be willing to do for Black women and queer Blacks what I had been doing for Black men and Black heterosexuals, which meant first of all learning more—and then defending them like my heroes had.

They were the darkness that scared me. I wanted to run away whenever I came off the elevator, turned the corner, and spotted Yaba and Kaila, whenever I approached the building and they were there. They warmly tossed smiles and greetings as I walked by not fast enough, forcing me to awkwardly toss them back. Sometimes they stopped me in small talk. Over time, they let me join them in long talk, unnerving me the most. It is best to challenge ourselves by dragging ourselves before people who intimidate us with their brilliance and constructive criticism. I didn't think about that. I wanted to run away. They did not let me run away, and I am grateful now because of it.

These women were everything they were not supposed to be, in my patriarchal and homophobic mind. Queer people are run by sex, not ideas. Queer people are abnormal. Feminists hate men. Feminists want female supremacy. But these Black feminists obviously liked me, a male. They were as ideological as they were sexual as they were normal. They did not speak of women ruling men. They spoke of gender and queer equity and freedom and mutuality and complementarity and power. Their jokes and attacks knew no gender or sexuality. If anything, they were harder on women. They were harder on queer people like Raena. They saw through her long before Weckea and I did.

No one seemed to incite them more than “patriarchal women”—really, patriarchal White women standing behind racist White patriarchs. I can only imagine what they thought years later, watching Kayla Moore defend her husband, Alabama's U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore, who had been accused of pedophilia and sexual assaults, who was asked on the campaign trail in 2017 when America was last great. “I think it was great at the

time when families were united—even though we had slavery,” he said. “Our families were strong, our country had direction.” This was long before we had so many women publicly attacking the women saying #MeToo. Patriarchal women, as a term, made no sense to me back then, like the term “homophobic homosexuals.” Only men can be patriarchal, can be sexist. Only heterosexuals can be homophobic. The radical Black queer feminism of those two women detached homophobic from heterosexual, detached sexist from men and feminist from women, in the way I later detached racist from White people and antiracist from Black people. They had a problem with homophobia, not with heterosexuals. They had a problem with patriarchy, not with men. Crucially, their going after all homophobes, no matter their sexual identity, showed me that homophobic ideas and policies and power were their fundamental problem. Crucially, their going after all patriarchs, no matter their gender identity, showed me that patriarchal ideas and policies and powers were their fundamental problem. They talked of queer people defending homophobia as powerfully as they talked about heterosexuals building a world for queer love. They talked of women defending sexism as powerfully as men building a feminist world. Maybe they had me in mind. Because they opened that feminist world to me where queer love is wedded to heterosexual love, in harmony. But this world scared me like they scared me. Opened by them, I learned, though—and eventually I wanted to help them create that new world.

I am forever grateful that the Black graduate-student discourse was ruled by queer Black feminists instead of by patriarchal Black male homophobes. They were my first role models of Black feminism, of queer antiracism, of antiracist feminism. They met my homophobic patriarchy and forced me to meet him, too. Their force forced me to check his ass, as desperate as I was to stay out of the way of their attacks, a desperation that transformed into a curiosity about Black feminism and queer theory itself, a curiosity that transformed into a desire to be a gender antiracist, to be a queer antiracist, to not fail Black people—all Black people.