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Camouflaging Race and Gender

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Camouflaging Race *and* Gender

University of California Regents voted last night to kill affirmative action in admissions, hiring, and contracting after a marathon meeting that erupted into an angry, raucous protest causing regents to find another room in which to cast their historic vote.

—*San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 July 1995 (emphasis added)

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, my daughter has been interested in the law, possibly because my father, uncle, brother, and cousin are impressive lawyers with an intense appreciation for the law. In high school she took courses in law in which she earned A's, and in her junior year she auditioned for and got on the mock trial team. She did really well on the team; partly because of her efforts her team made it to the finals in the State's competition. It was for her the most educational and social event of her high school experience.

Juniors on the mock trial team who audition in their senior year usually make the team again. My daughter had done very well in her junior year, so she auditioned again for the senior year and expected to get on the team. Surprisingly, of all the seniors, including a few black men, she did not make the team. She was devastated. A usually composed young woman who did extremely well in school, she collapsed in tears and was barely able to function.

Since her rejection from the team had been so unexpected, I went to her high school to find out how to explain this to her. Had she been terrible in her second audition? I'd been to most parent/teacher meetings. Yet it took me four days to find the teacher/mentor of the mock trial team despite the tens of messages I left him and the fact that I went to her high school on three successive days. I shudder to think of parents who would not have the time to pursue the matter or the confidence to question their child's teacher about the reasons for her "failure." When I did find my daughter's teacher, he told me that she had been very good on the team, but as a black girl, she spoke "too well" for the roles they needed on the present team. They needed blacks to play witnesses, blacks who sounded like "inner-city girls."

This was not the first time my daughter had been expected in school to "be" the stereotypical black girl, in other words, a gum-cracking, slurred-speaking, sassy girl—the image, unfortunately, even teachers often have of who black girls are supposed to be. My daughter had found herself during her years in high school to be the *only* black girl in calculus, and so on. But this was the ultimate blow for her. She'd loved the mock trial team, had devoted hours and hours to it,

fitting it into her homework, giving up social time to succeed at it. She was devastated. And here it was again—as she said to me, “If you’re black, you can’t win for losing.”

I begin this reflection on affirmative action debates within the University of California system with this incident because so often the opponents of such policies insist that the issue of race is dead—that poverty rather than race is the real issue—that we should give special “preference” *only* to the poor. Remarkably within this construct, no one says the issue of gender equity is dead; its significance to affirmative action debates is typically sidelined, though, despite the fact that there are people of color who are also female. While I’d like a thorough restructuring of this country’s characterizations and treatment of the poor *it* produces, I find this shift in rhetoric disingenuous in that so many of the people who use the argument that the issue of race is dead also insist that there is no such thing as “class” in America.

Nonetheless, as an intellectual, as a black woman, and as a feminist, I have tried to answer the question, Why should race and gender or precisely race/gender be taken into account? Doesn’t the foregrounding of race privilege middle-class people who just happen to be black? Why is gender a hidden, though powerful, construct in the anti-affirmative action arsenal?

Although in this essay I do not wish to focus on the long-standing debates among blacks about whether race or class is the primary root of our oppression, some history may be useful. I was born in the Caribbean, in a society like the United States that is saturated with racism, but unlike it in that blacks are in the majority. Certainly that majority status is one of the reasons the Caribbean has produced so many scholars who have focused on class oppression as primary. As descendants of European colonialism, and as inhabitants of societies where people of the same race were often managers of their own people for the colonists, Caribbean scholars tend to foreground *class* as the basis for our analysis of racism. Scholars such as C. L. R. James and Walter Rodney have emphasized how class oppression is at the root of poor people’s condition around the world as well as in the Caribbean. Still, when you come to *this man’s country* (*this man’s country* is a phrase that Caribbeans have used for the United States since the 1920s), Caribbeans discover that class analysis of their oppression is undermined by *this man’s country’s* discourse on race. Especially after studies of difference emerged in the 1980s, scholars all know that there are different forms of racism and that there is a form of racism that is specifically American in its contours.¹

Debates among blacks as to the relationship between class and race have not until recently included the centrality of gender to knowledge production. During the 1970s and 1980s, a much-fought-for realization among many scholars became increasingly important in public discourse, that there was more than *the woman question* that the traditional Left had proposed; rather, gender was central to the critical choices human beings could make.

The affirmative action debates have tended to foreground race as the central issue of controversy. Yet I tend to agree with Gloria Steinem that the anxieties caused by affirmative action policies may be more about gender than about race, since people of color have made but small increases in their numbers, whether one counts students, faculty, or contracting agencies. Rather, it is white women who appear to have forged ahead, who present more of a threat. That appearance of success may in fact be short-lived. In the 1990s, there has been a steady attack not only on welfare mothers but also on professional women. For example, on 8 January 1996, the *New York Times* reports: “Equal Opportunity Recedes for Most Female Lawyers.” It is a report that relates to my daughter—I clipped it out for her—though most people would think of this report as having to do only with white women. While nearly half of the students in the nation’s law schools are women, “women have been disproportionately hurt by the recent shrinking of law firms after a rapid expansion in the 1980s.”² As Steinem mentioned in a 1995 talk in the City Arts and Lectures series in San Francisco, the issue of race (including the perception that immigrants of color are taking over America) might well be a camouflage for the issue of gender, since race in this country is such a trigger point. Rather than being rewarded for their accomplishments, black women are sometimes punished precisely because they are *successful* black women.

My theoretical and literary writings on the intersections of race, class, and gender did not prepare me for this country’s assault on black girls. I submit to you the case of my daughter, the daughter of a UC professor, an excellent student who went on to major in sociology at UC Santa Cruz, graduated with highest honors in her major, and is presently at Georgetown Law School—clearly a middle-class black. She was dealt the major blow of her high school career not because she was poor but precisely because she was a successful black middle-class student who spoke “too well,” in other words, who did not exhibit the signs of blackness that are equated with black poverty and the inner city. That experience was so pivotal for my daughter that her personal statement in applications to law school began with her remembrance of the mock trial incident and the strategies she’d used to turn it into a strong determination to pursue her dreams of becoming a lawyer.

And yet I wonder how many other young middle-class black women have experienced some variation of this experience and how many have decided like my daughter that “if you’re black you can’t win for losing.” And if you’re a woman, you’ve somehow got to overachieve. Why, in any case, should they have to overcome this emotional trauma? “Merit, merit,” I had preached to my daughter. And here it was. Merit turned into disadvantage because she did not fit the stereotype of what so many conceive of as being a black woman in this society. Lord knows

what such a characterization might mean for those inner-city black women who do “speak well.”

I think of the scholar Thomas Sowell’s insistence that Caribbean Americans constitute a model minority: immigrants who work hard, go to school, and ignore the racial nibblings at our soul that are alive in American society.³ In that context, my Afro–Caribbean American daughter’s *mock* trial experience could be interpreted as the peak of model minorityness. Ironically, she was born in the United States. My brother was not. A partner in a major law firm, one of few such blacks, my brother has accomplished remarkable achievements, though his are not as remarkable as those of my father, who clawed his way up through a plantation system to become a lawyer at a time when class background in the Caribbean was central to mobility. Yet even though my brother’s way was easier, the psychological battering of racism in the United States has turned him into an angry black man. My father, who remained in the Caribbean, cannot fathom the depths of his son’s anger at the “glass ceiling” he’s repeatedly bumped his head against. The primacy of racism in the United States has been for my brother, as well as for so many other model minority Caribbean Americans, the initiation into the “American Way.” My brother’s point of view is a tribute to the tremendous impact of the psychological battering of racism—by racism I mean not just lynchings or beatings but also the assault on the spirit.

In that regard, I think of myself here at UC Berkeley as a person who feels, despite her accomplishments, alienated from the culture of this university. What do my black and colored students feel if I still feel strange and often unappreciated, despite my accomplishments at *this* university? One of my Caribbean American colleagues, Opal Palmer Adisa, writes in one of her pieces that “racism drains [her] energy leaving [her] feeling psychically weak and wasted so that it takes a concerted effort to will [her]self to continue to move, to smile at [her] children, to not detonate from anger.”⁴ The UC Regents meeting might have been *angry* and *rancorous*; my life, for more than a night, has been too often fired by the emotion of anger. It is this effect of racism that whites who talk about poverty as the only disease we face refuse to acknowledge. It is not only poverty that explains the inner cities. It is this nibbling at the spirit, this wasting of the soul. Those of us who sustain these war injuries, what Alice Walker calls “warrior marks,” understand only too well that the interpretation of any issue in this society is based on one’s position and stance.⁵

I hold a relatively unique position at this university. I am one of a handful of black women who are full professors in the University of California system (we could comfortably sit around a lunch table), a position I reached partly because of the “liberal” atmosphere of the 1970s. Although I received a Ph.D. with high honors from Columbia University, I am well aware that the few black women academics that preceded me were restricted to appointments in the historically

sexist black universities and that they had very limited access to historically racist and sexist white universities until the 1970s, when a few, and I mean a very few, of us gained entrance into what was considered to be *the* American academy. And unlike most actors in the affirmative action debate, I have been a part of the process of affirmative action at UC Berkeley, for I have been a faculty participant on the Special Admissions Committee, possibly the most time-consuming committee service I have ever done for the University (and one that minorities are typically expected to perform—in a sense, part of our affirmative action benefits). My participation in the Special Admissions Committee, as well as my position as one of the few full professors in the system who is a black woman, has informed the theoretical bases of my work. That is, at the center of my work is the notion that it is the intersections of differences rather than one single difference that is always at work.

I was appalled at how misinformed the discussants at the Regents meeting were about *how* the UC system actually admits students. So many claimed that standards had declined as a result of affirmative action. Yet in the last twelve years, eligibility standards have been raised five times; in fact, standards are higher than ever before in UC's history. There are three tiers of admission to the University. The first 50 percent of students are admitted based on grade point averages and SAT scores, as well as on special talents. The next 45 percent are the top students (defined by grade point averages; test scores; and assessments of essays, activities, and awards) from categories of students defined by UC diversity criteria. Such criteria include socioeconomic disadvantage, ethnic underrepresentation, geographic origin, athletic recruitment, age, special talent, and disability. Also considered are applicants whose academic index scores narrowly missed the requirements for the first tier. The remaining 5 percent are admitted based on a particularly intensive, qualitative, case-by-case evaluation by a Special Admissions Committee. Students considered in this tier are from the diversity categories defined above who have not been admitted in the first two tiers but who demonstrate a high probability of achieving success at Berkeley. For example, there are exceptional music students who do not do well in math but who will, without question, succeed at Berkeley.

The affirmative action debate has focused especially on race, sometimes on gender. Legislators, even some UC faculty, seem to believe that race and gender are the only factors taken into consideration in special admissions. In fact, there are many factors the committee considers: gender; race; region; and special situations such as disabilities, special talents, special hardship situations, and the challenges faced by returning students.

The Special Admissions Committee consists of faculty members, students, and administrators, each of whom reads and critiques each student's application. In other words, there is a discussion of each individual student's possibilities, the problems the student has faced, and how that student has dealt with those prob-

lems. We look at students' personal statements, their records, their SATs and grade points, comments from their teachers, as well as notes taken by administrators of the students' interviews. We carefully consider the case of, for example, a Chicana whose family is opposed to her going to college, even to the extent of restricting the hours she can go to the library, who yet manages to achieve a 3.4 grade point average; or a white working-class man from a rural area in Northern California, whose family wants him to work rather than go to college, but who has, against tremendous odds, achieved a 3.5. We do not simply admit students when there are special situations that affect their performance. We may consider whether the student would benefit more by going first to community college or to special Bridge programs. But the committee is aware that maturity, persistence, and intellectual focus are factors as important for educational growth as grade point averages and SAT scores, as many studies of successful college students have shown.

The idea of difference as an energizing force was proposed by the poet and theorist Audre Lorde, whose thoughts filtered into universities as well as society at large through the work of scholar-activists like myself, who stormed the intellectual barricades during the 1970s.⁶ It was a result of policies like affirmative action that the monolithic intellectual community of that time was allowed access to our thoughts. White middle-class students (the public's image of *the* college student) have benefited, perhaps even more than students of color or disabled students, from the diversity of *bodies* and *minds* in the classroom. Through it they have come to know the America they are living in, the world they are living in. Contrary to my colleague Todd Gitlin's most recent study on multiculturalism, which tends to be very critical of cultural balkanization, I think that the separateness of groups of students at Berkeley is in fact the seed of their ultimately understanding one another. Students are more honest, I often think, than faculty are. They know you've got to really get to know yourself, your "group," and then struggle to know others, not just their bodies, but their histories, points of view—what I call cosmologies—if you are to really know yourself and others. They know that change has to be honest if it is to be lasting. Often "adult" faculty want a ready-made solution based on their desires for a better world, without being willing to work out power relations, racial and ethnic relations, gender relations. Often adults want a pretty picture of integration.

The classes at Berkeley, at least my classes, are like a United Nations, filled with students from a multitude of backgrounds—Bangladeshi, West African, Canadian, East Asian, Latin American, European—who are Americans. Scholars and students of color have generated entire new areas of inquiry on, for example, diasporas, sexualities, borders, and languages. The young people I teach (including young white men) are engaging each other in a conversation that is inclusive

of ethnicities and cultures worldwide, the kind of conversation we need if we are to save this planet. Not only are these young people concerned with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference; they also confront other major issues of our time, such as the environmental devastation of the planet and the intense injustices brought about by political waste.

I am not an affirmative action beneficiary per se. Yet I am, in the sense that the work I did on such African American women as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison would not have been heard if it had not been for affirmative action policies. I do not apologize for the atmosphere created by affirmative action. American universities and society at large have gained much from what African American women writers and scholars have written during the last thirty years. In fact, we have produced a golden age of writing—one that this country has yet to acknowledge despite Toni Morrison's winning of the Nobel Prize. The University of California system has produced the very best scholars of American literature, and by that I mean *American* literature, precisely because a few like me were allowed into its halls. But what a price we have paid. More than it was worth, I sometimes think, since, in this anti-affirmative action atmosphere, we continue to be called upon to defend our right to inclusion. And yet all I hear from the media is that white men are upset.

I too am upset. The July Regents' decision marks people like myself, faculty hired in good faith by the University, as people who somehow do not make the grade. I really resent this effect of the Regents' decision, perhaps even more than its effects on students. Faculty members like myself have introduced into this university vital intellectual issues of our society to which white students, as much as any other group, are responding. Faculty of color have, against great odds, constructed an alternative canon that has made it possible for such writers as Frances Harper, the most famous African American woman writer and thinker of the nineteenth century, as well as such twentieth-century writers as Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker, to be taken seriously.

I take the Regents' insult against faculty personally because I risked my entire academic career to do the work that I have done. We (and by *we*, I mean the few African American scholars admitted into the historically white universities in the early 1970s) have launched an industry that has invigorated academic departments and disciplines throughout the entire University. We get very little in return for our labors. In a published essay, "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive the Academy," I explore the apparent contradiction that, while there has been a tremendous surge of interest in African American literatures and studies, the number of black Ph.D.s has declined.⁷ I am concerned that the message of the Regents' decision, especially to African American graduate students, who now comprise only 4.4 percent of our total graduate student population, is that they are not wanted at UC, an embarrassing situation that I have had to contend with

when I have spoken, since the decision, at universities in Europe as well as in this country.

Academics of color have not just performed a civil service. We have extended the landscapes of American and British literatures (to include, for example, Irish and South Asian traditions within the United States and Britain). We are forging ahead to transform the concept of American literatures as including the literature of South America, possibly the richest in the world today. And we are transcending the borders of disciplines to produce interdisciplinary studies.

Academics of color are being used as scapegoats for California's problems because the State is unwilling to face the real issue underlying the affirmative action debate. The real issue is that the State is not using its vast resources to create what some of my colleagues, in an open letter to the UC Regents printed in the *New York Times*, call "the need for a robust, healthy educational environment."⁸ This State's governing bodies have been criminal in their refusal to provide resources for our educational system and in their propagandizing against the very educational systems they are weakening through budgetary legislation and "symbolic actions" such as the Regents' decision on 20 July.

In its political process, this State is destroying one of the world's greatest public universities, even as private institutions such as Stanford are broadcasting their support for affirmative action. The Regents have made UC a laughingstock among universities even as they, like many of the State's governing bodies, are overtly using fears about race, and covertly those about gender, as a camouflage for their actions. The University may never again be able to recuperate what already has been lost and what will surely be lost as a result of the 20 July decision—unless it is rescinded as soon as possible.

Finally, the question—the *real* question—is not about that decision, but about whether the system will abandon its responsibility to the educational process and allow its role in the affirmative action debate to camouflage the political machinations of the supporters of the California Civil Rights Initiative.

Notes

1. For example, see Henry Louis Gates Jr. ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago, 1986).
2. "Equal Opportunity Recedes for Most Female Lawyers," *New York Times*, 8 January 1996, A10.
3. Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality* (New York, 1984).
4. Opal Palmer Adisa, "For the Love of My Children," *Oakland Voices Quarterly Community* 1 (Fall 1995): 13.

5. Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (New York, 1993).
6. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y., 1984).
7. Barbara T. Christian, "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive the Academy," in David Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism: A Cultural Reader* (London, 1995), 168–79.
8. The Hispanic Coalition on Higher Education, "An Open Letter to the Regents of the University of California," *New York Times*, 20 July 1995, A11.