The Black Agenda

What’s in it for me? Putting Black expert knowledge front and center.

In March 2020, the world started hearing about this thing called the coronavirus, or COVID-19. As urgent reports poured in from Wuhan, and then northern Italy, and then the rest of the planet, there was panic but also a sense of solidarity. People leaned out of their windows and clanged pots and pans to celebrate the medical professionals working on the frontlines. Headlines talked about how the world is united by the common experience of COVID. But that’s not entirely true. The common experience part, yes. That’s true. That is. No one could have lived through this pandemic without being affected. But we’re not affected equally. Black people and people of color have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Black communities have been getting sicker, while being less able to access good health care. Institutional racism and decades of economic inequity also mean that Black people are more likely to be working in low-wage jobs which carry a higher risk of exposure than other jobs. So, Black people carry the heaviest burden from the COVID pandemic. But, strangely, Black experts aren’t asked about it, or invited to shape policy, or brief the public. Think about it. How many Black scientists, or sociologists, or doctors, or politicians have you seen on the news over the last two years? How many COVID-related panels have featured a Black researcher? This strange omission reflects just another facet of institutional racism. The erasure of Black experts. Experts who have the knowledge that’s needed to address some of the most urgent challenges of our times. The Black Agenda is just one step toward addressing this erasure. It puts Black expert knowledge front and center. These blinks explore how this knowledge could transform two key areas that impact every aspect of the world: climate justice and the tech industry. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why you can’t fight for polar bears if you don’t fight for Black lives; how facial recognition technologies are racist; and what environmentalists can learn from the prison abolition movement.

You can’t fight for the climate without fighting for Black lives.

In the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter protests took place throughout the United States and across the world. It was a time of reckoning in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Similar murders had taken place at the hands of policemen, but this one evoked a different kind of protest. One that ignored geographic boundaries and spread across the world. For climate activist Mary Annaïse Heglar, these protests were a long time coming. But she found it very confusing to suddenly see fellow environmentalists say that they needed to pause their fight for climate justice and focus on Black Lives Matter activism instead. She was confused because, for her, it wasn’t an either/or proposition. She’d been fighting for climate justice for ten years. And she knew that the fight hinged on attacking systemic racism head-on. In other words, you can’t fight one issue without also, at the same time, fighting the other. Because they’re wrapped up together like toxic bedfellows. In white environmental activist circles, there’s an enduring myth that Black people don’t care about animals and the environment. That’s not true, and there’s the data to prove it. But it is true that many Black people don’t

relate to white environmentalists – the people who say that they care deeply about protecting people and the planet. Why? Because many of these people and organizations fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the struggle. They see racism and climate justice as being two separate issues, when, actually, they're entwined. To understand this better we need to introduce a key concept: intersectionality. This concept was first introduced by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. An intersectional approach is one that looks at how different marginal identities can impact each other. For example, intersectional feminism doesn't just look at how being a woman can affect your opportunities in the world. It also looks at how being a Black woman, or a Black queer woman can magnify the discrimination you experience. It says, we can't understand one struggle without understanding how those related struggles intersect and compound it. Intersectionality is a key concept for understanding why the Black Agenda is essential for climate activism. Climate change has been called the "Great Equalizer." The logic being, the destruction of the planet affects everybody. That statement is true, but it's incomplete. Because the thing is, climate change affects everybody, but it doesn't affect everybody equally. In fact, as Annaïse Heglar says, instead of being an equalizer, climate change is actually the "Great Multiplier." It takes any threat you were already under, and multiplies it.

Climate change multiplies existing threats to Black communities.

To understand how this works, there's another important concept we need to talk about. It was introduced by meteorologist James Marshall Shepherd. Environmental vulnerability. Some communities are especially at risk from climate change. And not just any communities. Black communities. Indigenous communities. People of color. Institutional racism has meant that Black communities are structurally vulnerable to the effects of air and soil pollution, contaminated water supplies, and rising temperatures. For example, in the United States, African American communities are much more likely to live in urban heat islands – areas of the city that are hotter than other places because of the abundance of asphalt and lack of vegetation. They're also more likely to live in homes with bad ventilation that are placed closer to dumping grounds, power plants, and toxic waste sites. Why is that? Well, have you heard of redlining? Redlining was a practice that took place in the US in the early twentieth century. Financial institutions would literally draw red lines on maps to indicate areas where Black people lived. Those redlined areas were designated as being too financially risky to qualify for home loans, life insurance, and other essential services. That meant, effectively, that Black people weren't able to become homeowners, and were deprived of a major source of intergenerational wealth. The kind of wealth that ensures you can buy yourself a safe place to live in a leafy area. The historical legacy of the racist policy of redlining means that, today, African Americans are environmentally vulnerable in a way that white populations are not. But redlining is just one example of how institutional racism makes Black communities vulnerable to climate change. Another is the prison system. Inmates are some of the most vulnerable populations to the effects of climate change. In fact, at one US prison in Pennsylvania, over 80 percent of the inmates suffered from infections to their respiratory systems because they were exposed to coal ash. And that's no anomaly. At least 589 prisons in the United States are situated in close proximity to Superfund cleanup sites. These are hazardous commercial waste sites that have been designated as needing intensive cleanup. So, inmates are exposed to some of the worst pollution in the United States, weakening their respiratory systems, and making them

even more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. And because of long histories of institutional racism in policing and the criminal justice system, the vast majority of prisoners are Black, Indigenous, or people of color.

Climate activists can learn from the playbook of prison abolitionists.

The intersectional perspective on climate change illuminates how fighting for climate justice without acknowledging racism only deals with one part of the problem. But an intersectional lens also points the way towards possible solutions. The fight to stop the Keystone Pipeline from pumping oil from Canada to the United States is a good example of that. The protest was led by Indigenous climate activists whose communities were directly affected by the pipeline, and supported by a wide base of other environmentalists and political allies. The protest was effective in stopping the pipeline from operating, which was an enormous win both for Indigenous communities and for the climate. Climate activists can also learn from movements like prison abolition activism. The prison abolition movement campaigns for the rights of inmates in correctional facilities. This movement also champions alternatives to incarceration, like restorative justice, where perpetrators of crimes take steps to repair the harm they've caused to their victims. Restorative justice has been proven to reduce repeat offenses, help victims by providing a tangible sense of justice, and reduce PTSD. This same concept of restorative justice could fundamentally shift how we fight climate change. Imagine if the big polluters were forced to be accountable to the people they've harmed. Imagine if environmental reparations were paid to Majority World countries which have been the dumping grounds for countries like the US. Those are the kinds of visions made possible by an intersectional approach to climate activism. But climate activism isn't the only area which needs to center a Black Agenda. Another urgent challenge to civil rights comes straight from Silicon Valley and the tech industry.

Facial recognition technology is flawed and dangerous.

Days before his forty-second birthday, Robert Williams was aggressively arrested in front of his daughter, and dragged off to jail. The reason? Facial recognition cameras had falsely identified him as a criminal. The same thing happened to Nijeer Parks, who spent ten traumatizing days in prison and $5,000 on his defense after he was also misidentified. These arrests are exactly what computer scientists Deborah Raji and Joy Buolamwini had predicted. They'd conducted an external audit of Amazon's facial recognition software. Their study found that the software was much less accurate when trying to identify people with darker skin tones. Thirty percent less accurate, to be exact. But when they published their study, Amazon was quick to dismiss it as being "false and misleading." It took two years and the combined pressure of government regulators and support from civil rights groups to get Amazon to budge and remove the faulty product from the market. The same product it had been marketing to police departments and the organizations responsible for arresting and deporting immigrants and refugees, ICE. The tech industry is overwhelmingly white. In fact, less than half of 1 percent of the workforce are Black women. Yet, overwhelmingly, Black women have been responsible for calling out the dangers and shortcomings of AI and other tech

products that reproduce institutional racism. But instead of being lauded for helping the industry become more fair, Black researchers like Raji and Buolamwini are routinely belittled and excluded. They face an exhausting and uphill battle to get the results of their studies acknowledged. And all that time, people like Robert Williams bear the consequences of the technology. Clearly, you can't count on companies like Amazon to identify the dangerous limitations of their own products. Neither can you count on someone with a vested interest in the company, like a paid consultant. That's why it's essential to have outside audits like the one that Raji and Buolamwini carried out. Audits that are created with the intention of protecting marginalized Black communities from the harmful effects of AI.

Algorithmic assaults pose a serious threat to Black communities.

Despite what you may have heard, there's nothing neutral about AI, or artificial intelligence. AI has been hailed as a technology that can transform industries like policing, education, and commerce. It digitizes and automates tasks that can be completed with the help of decision-making algorithms. Already, jobs that were traditionally done by humans, like approving an insurance claim, or sorting through job applicants are now being done entirely by an algorithm. Tech companies have proclaimed this means those decisions are now more democratic – the fact that they're done by a machine suggests that a cold rationality will be applied, that's free from any human prejudice. But nothing could be further from the truth. Because there's nothing neutral about how algorithms are created. They're made by overwhelmingly white tech computer scientists in white tech companies with no real collaboration or consultation with Black experts. This means that the products – just like the Amazon facial recognition software – will be faulty, and Black people will pay the price. Professor Brandeis Marshall has described this phenomenon as an algorithmic assault where institutional racism is reproduced in the digital sphere. Machines, programmed with the prejudices of their makers, take on the job of excluding Black people from jobs and home loans and insurance policies. What's worse is that there's no accountability for how these decisions are made. Responsibility is passed off onto the "objective" algorithm which operates in a sort of black box. No one knows exactly how it came to the decision, which makes it very difficult to refute. Marshall argues that Black communities need to take algorithmic assaults just as seriously as they'd take a physical assault. That Black computer scientists and tech geeks and engineers need to learn as much as they can about the language of algorithms and how they work. And that digital translators, storytellers, and educators are needed to communicate those findings to the broader community. Only by taking those steps is it possible for Black people to protect their digital identities against the invisible assaults taking place online. Jordan Harrod argues that researchers in the AI sphere also need to look critically at the language they're using to describe the effects of technologies. For example, people who talk about "bias" should be careful to pin down what they mean, as bias is what is known as a "suitcase term." As in, the term can contain many different possible meanings. Similarly, terms like "fairness" are frequently overused and misunderstood in AI research. For example, a company can declare its hiring algorithm to be "fair" if it fulfills the requirement of maximizing profit as it's been programmed to do. But that definition of "fairness" is flawed, as it doesn't account for the greater socioeconomic reality that comes to play in hiring decisions. Researchers need to pin down these slippery terms, and become accountable for their own definitions. Only then will it be

possible to create a meaningful shared vocabulary that can get to the heart of what "bias" and "fairness" really mean.

Black women lead the fight to hold tech companies accountable.

In spite of being vastly underrepresented in the technology fields, Black women are leading the way in pointing to the dangerous limitations of AI, and the potential for algorithmic violence to reproduce racist violence in everyday life. But it's difficult work, made more difficult by the fact that companies like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft don't want to hear about it. In fact, in 2020, in the middle of the Black Lives Matter protests, Google fired Timnit Gebru, a distinguished AI researcher who expressed concern about a lack of transparency in the company. As we've already heard, Amazon went to great lengths to discredit work by Black women researchers. And it was prepared to spend huge sums of money on lobbyists to help the passage of facial recognition technology bills, instead of making its product more accurate and therefore safer. Black computer scientists, researchers, and auditors do their work in the context of these multiple attacks and pervasive silencing. They're not invited to consult at internal meetings, or to the latest tech conferences, or to give evidence in congress. Their work is dismissed as being prejudiced, or the result of "militant liberalism." In this hostile environment, these experts need institutional support to be able to do their work. Audits such as the one carried out by Raji and Buolamwini should be legally mandated. Companies should be forced to cooperate and give access to the relevant data. Partnerships with civil rights organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union – or ACLU – have also proved to be essential to putting pressure on tech monoliths like Facebook. Government institutes like the Federal Trade Commission and the Government Accountability Office, as well as grassroots organizations like Data for Black Lives and the Algorithmic Justice League have also partnered with academics to try to hold tech companies accountable. Technology moves so fast and the legal system so slowly that often these interventions come too late. But there's no option but to keep fighting. Otherwise, the most marginalized communities will continue to pay the price.

Complex problems demand intersectional solutions.

These brief explorations of climate change activism and the development of AI software have shown definitively that these are racial justice issues. So why do we pretend that they're not? Why do we pretend that fighting for the climate means putting polar bears above Black lives, and that algorithms are "fair" or "neutral"? Or, to put it more bluntly, why do white people pretend that? The answer is what it's always been. Because it suits them. White people benefit from racist systems and they have done so for hundreds of years. They're not motivated to find the solutions to the social crises that are caused by racist policies and practices. Or, even if they are motivated, they often lack the specific skills and lived experience that would allow them to find the solutions we need. To return, again, to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in 2020. Long before official data revealed that COVID was disproportionately affecting Black communities, Black researchers and activists were sounding the alarm. That's because they were witnessing the devastation firsthand. Furthermore, they knew very well how structurally vulnerable

Black communities are to a health-care crisis. But, as you already know, those Black experts weren’t the ones you were seeing on the news. They weren’t invited to panels or given fat grants to do research. That has to change. Complex societal challenges demand intersectional solutions. The kinds of solutions made possible when centering the Black Agenda.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Institutional racism affects every facet of our society, from health care to climate change to the future of AI. But Black experts are excluded from vital conversations and policy decisions. Instead of waiting to be given a place at the table, Black experts should lead the conversations on these vital issues. Want more expert knowledge on tackling systemic racism? Check out the blinks to Heather McGhee’s The Sum of Us, Mikki Kendall’s Hood Feminism or Ibram X. Kendi’s How to Be an Antiracist.