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Body

GENE DEMBY: Just a heads up, y'all. The following episode contains explicit language - so, you know, going to be a little cussing.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GENE DEMBY: You are listening to CODE SWITCH from NPR. I'm Gene Demby.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And I'm Shereen Marisol Meraji.

GENE DEMBY: Shereen, I know you love yourself a rom-com.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Gene, who doesn't love people who never, ever, ever should be together in a million years falling in love? We're talking chance encounters between total opposites with undeniable chemistry struggling against all odds to win at the game of love. Rom-coms are the best.

GENE DEMBY: Well, just for you, we're going to start this episode with a couple that has undeniable chemistry. Meet Kara (ph) and Eric **Johnston** (ph).

KARA **JOHNSTON**: We met so randomly in Ohio. I am on, like, breakup tour.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Spring of - what's that? - '06.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Yes.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Yes.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: I was, like, devastated. And so friends were like, come visit us. And so I tracked from D.C. all the way to Bowling Green, just outside of Toledo. The first time we laid eyes on each other, we were going into a party at the student center...

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: ...At this university.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: It was thrown by the alpha - shoutout to the brother. When I first saw Kara, I noticed she had natural hair, which I really love, and just this perfect smile with these really inviting eyes. And I hold the door open for her.

No Headline In Original

KARA **JOHNSTON**: I was probably wearing heels. And I was like, you're just a little boy.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: She acts like she wasn't trying to tell me to holla at her, but she's looking at me like, holla - you should holla at me. And I'm like, you know what? I might just do that.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: You know, he introduces himself.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Hey, funny seeing you here.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: And I'm like, let me just stop you right there, before you even - like, I don't go here. I don't live here. I'm **not** in college.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Long story short, the way that I met her started me trying to convince her that, you know, I was worthy. So at that point, I was trying to combat all the reasons for her **not** to date me.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: You know, 'cause he's, like, you know, ready for it.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: I'm **not** from here neither.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Exactly (laughter).

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: I don't even know nothing about this place. We're in the same boat.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: He was charming. He has dimples and a very nice smile. It wasn't, like, terribly hard to convince me (laughter).

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: We worked it in there.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Right. I should have known that he was eventually going to be a lobbyist 'cause he just lobbied me right onto his side.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: She couldn't keep me away since.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh, they're cute. This is perfect rom-com. She's nursing a broken heart. She should **not** actually be dating anyone at all right now.

GENE DEMBY: Here comes this dimpled, pretty-teeth dude who's a alpha, who spits all this game at her. And they became, like, the attractive straight black couple you see in a commercial for a luxury SUV or something like that. And now, they have a whole a** family.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: We have Ella (ph).

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Eric IV.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: I'm Eric III. He's Eric IV.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: And then our little one is Evan (ph).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Well, is that the end of the story? It can't be because this is a rom-com, and that's too perfect. And this is a CODE SWITCH episode, so that means there must be something more to this love story.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah, about that - Kara and Eric have some, let's say, points of contention. So remember when Kara said that Eric was a lobbyist...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Mm-hmm.

GENE DEMBY: ...Kind of out of nowhere. It's relevant here because Eric is a Democratic lobbyist, and Kara is **not** a Democrat.

No Headline In Original

KARA **JOHNSTON**: I don't believe that the government will fix social problems. It's **not** going to happen. I certainly don't believe that the government - if they're going to attack social problems, like, out of nowhere, it's **not** going to be black people's social problems (laughter).

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: We're talking about moving in together. We're talking about getting married. You know, we - the kids are already here. All that is, like, fantastic, right? And I'm realizing, oh, like, she really believes this, right? Like, this, like - I'm just like, OK.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: I fundamentally want my money to stay in my pockets with my family and my children. I care about other people, but I would like to be able to care about them on my own as opposed to the government deciding what I care about and doling my money out that way - and also ineffectively. That was my stance.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. So Eric knew that Kara was conservative. But as time went on in their relationship and they got closer and more serious, she started to openly identify as a Republican.

When she said that she was a Republican, what did you think?

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Don't tell my friends.

GENE DEMBY: Period.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: All right. So he is a Democratic lobbyist. She's a Republican. If I wasn't at work right now, I'd be taking bets on whether they were getting a divorce, but that feels very unprofessional - but seriously.

GENE DEMBY: And just a quick biographical note - Eric is from Brownsville, Brooklyn. Those of y'all who know Brownsville know Brownsville. Eric grew up in the projects.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: There were times when we would have, you know, like, really difficult and heated discussions.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Or, like, a really good one. By good, I mean, like, we didn't - we were really, genuinely mad at each other. We had a public housing debate. And he is like...

GENE DEMBY: From Brownsville.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Right.

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: Public housing capital of the United States.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Right. And we still, I think, have this issue where we feel like solutions are - the way that we get to things are still different.

GENE DEMBY: And because Eric's job is so public-facing, you know, Shereen, people like to comment on their interparty marriage...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh, I'm sure.

GENE DEMBY: ...A lot.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh, definitely.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: He has explained that he has told people that he is married to a Republican. And, like, it'll be white people. And they'll be - is she black?

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: (Laughter).

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Like, it's like a whisper. Like, is she white? Is she...

No Headline In Original

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: And then they meet her. They're like, oh...

KARA **JOHNSTON**: (Laughter).

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: ...Yeah. Got it.

GENE DEMBY: So yeah, they're working through this. And sometimes Eric will troll her a little bit. Like, they'll be out at some function. And she might say something a little, like, spicy or controversial in mixed company. And Eric will be like, I mean, she is a Republican. And then everybody will laugh, like ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. And then he'll be like, nah, for real; she's a Republican.

Kara is **not** only the lone Republican in her marriage; she's also the only Republican in her family. She grew up in Cleveland, which is a heavily Democratic city. She said her mom worked in the city's administration for a long time. Her pops was a union guy who worked in the mill. He doesn't even know that she's a Republican.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: We've talked about it in my family. My family has talked to me about it quite a bit.

GENE DEMBY: Everyone but him.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Yes. I have **not** had a conversation with my father ever.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: Soon as this drops.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Yeah.

ERIC **JOHNSTON**: (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: So when your father hears this, he's going to have questions, I imagine.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Like, he cannot stand - like, he thinks that Ronald Reagan is probably, like - I mean, there's, like, Lucifer. And then there's, like, Ronald Reagan.

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: So yeah.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: Their marriage is full of a lot of ongoing negotiations.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And you know, we're always negotiating things in a marriage...

GENE DEMBY: Yeah.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...Hopefully, if we're being honest. But I do have to know something - something that's been on my mind, actually, since the beginning of this. Did Kara vote for President Obama?

GENE DEMBY: Good question. I asked her about that. She said she did vote for Obama in 2008 because she thought he was a moderate. She voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 because she said that...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh.

GENE DEMBY: ...Obama had veered too far to the left for her liking. In some ways, you might mistake her for a Democrat. She supports broad access to abortion. She says she supports LGBTQ rights. But when it comes to things like taxes and government spending and education, Kara says elected officials should just fall back. For example, she says public schools have failed black folks, so why should we be so beholden to them?

No Headline In Original

KARA **JOHNSTON**: I don't love the way charter schools are structured. I don't think anybody is excited about the fact that they're pulling from schools before the government has an opportunity to make them better. But how long has the government had to make them better and **not** done so?

GENE DEMBY: She also says, like, look; one of the most obvious examples of government interference in people's lives is all of that unnecessary contact that black folks have with the police. She says you can fix that with less government. To Kara, it's like the American government has always played a big part in racism in America. So why do we trust the government to fix racism in America?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: It sounds to me like Kara's arriving at a lot of conventionally conservative principles and ideas but in, quote, unquote, "unconventional" way - you know? - a very different way than white conservatives...

GENE DEMBY: Yup.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...Would come to their conservatism. It feels like hers is a black conservatism versus a white conservatism.

GENE DEMBY: Right. That's the way it sounds to me, too. Like - and obviously, there are lots of black conservatives out there. And like you just said, black conservatives often have different priorities than white conservatives do. So you can be a black conservative and still vote for Democrats. In fact, most black conservatives still vote for Democrats. But registered Republicans - they have to hide.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "KEY AND PEELE")

IFY NWADIWE: (As Democratic Voter #1) You two are Democrats, aren't you?

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY: (As character) What?

(LAUGHTER)

JORDAN PEELE: (As character) Of course we are.

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY: (As character) I mean, you see the color of our skin, don't you? How could we **not** blindly vote Democratic?

JORDAN PEELE: (As character) I mean, that would be ridiculous.

LANCE MOORE: (As Democratic Voter #2) Whatever.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I have been waiting for this sketch to show up. That's "Key & Peele." And it's their black Republican sketch, which is pretty funny. And I'm wondering, Gene, are you wearing the outfit...

GENE DEMBY: Why would I put on the...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...To get into character for this?

GENE DEMBY: Just to empathize with our black Republican brethren and sistren (ph) - no, 'cause the outfit looks crazy. It's dad jeans. There's a leather jacket. I can't do it.

As that "Key & Peele" sketch illustrates, black Republicans, like Kara, might just be the biggest outlier in mainstream party politics.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I mean, is that surprising? How big of an outlier are we talking about?

No Headline In Original

GENE DEMBY: The Republican Party is practically alabaster. Somewhere around 90% of the party is white. It's about 6% Latinx, which is still **not** very Latinx. But it's only about 1% black. And if you just look at black people - right? - in presidential elections, Republicans routinely struggle just to get to 10% of the overall black vote.

And of course, black voters aren't just Democrats. In a lot of ways, they're the backbone of the Democratic Party. Since 1992, there hasn't been a candidate who has won the Democratic Party's primary who has also **not** won the majority of the black vote. That's according to NBC.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: But Gene, there are these high-profile black Republicans who get a lot of shine in the media. Let's name-check a few - Clarence Thomas, Herman Cain...

GENE DEMBY: Godfather Pizza.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...Condoleezza Rice...

GENE DEMBY: Condi Rice.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...Ben Carson, Kanye West for a hot minute (laughter).

GENE DEMBY: This is **not** the last time you hear about Kanye in this episode.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: But folks like Kara, rank-and-file Republicans - they're unicorns.

GENE DEMBY: And that is what we're getting into this episode, Shereen. Who are these outliers who are choosing to sit alone at the black table in the corner of the super-white big tent?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: Why are they there? And what can they teach us about the ways we all cast our ballots?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GENE DEMBY: Kara says she has no illusions about the Republican Party's racism. But she told me that black Democrats are kind of hoping upon hope that white people will stop white peopleing (ph).

KARA **JOHNSTON**: Republicans have done some overtly, on-the-record, blatant racist things in the past. Certainly, that has happened. Democrats have a long-standing history of doing covertly racist things and trying to spin their racism into, but I have a black friend, so I couldn't be racist. And I just chose to have my racism overt.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And that, you know, covert racism is something we talk about on the podcast all the time.

GENE DEMBY: Yup.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: But I do take issue with Kara saying Republicans have done blatantly racist things in the past.

GENE DEMBY: Right.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: No. That's happening right now.

GENE DEMBY: You got voter suppression and the citizenship question, and Mexicans are rapists and drug dealers and invaders. What am I missing? - s***hole-gate (ph). And you have everything that happened at Charlottesville.

KARA **JOHNSTON**: They nominate Donald Trump. And it becomes, we are standing behind white supremacy. And that was a turning point for me.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: OK. There we go.

No Headline In Original

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter) Yeah. Kara said that she just could not bang with the Republican Party like that anymore - not after President Trump. So she stopped IDing with the party. She now calls herself an Independent. And President Trump is something that a lot of black Republicans have to deal with. I mean, there are not a lot of black Republicans, but you know what I mean.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: One percent.

GENE DEMBY: The president has fundamentally changed the social arithmetic for them in more ways than one.

COREY FIELDS: Black Republicans - they're minorities among Republicans....

GENE DEMBY: Shereen, that's Corey D. Fields.

COREY FIELDS: ...And they're minorities among black people.

GENE DEMBY: Corey is an associate professor of sociology at Georgetown. He's also the author of "Black Elephants In The Room: The Unexpected Politics Of African American Republicans."

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I really like that title.

GENE DEMBY: I did, too. I really want to name this episode (laughter)...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Black elephants...

GENE DEMBY: ...Black elephants in the room. Anyway, "Black Elephants In The Room" - that book is essentially an ethnographic study of black Republican activists. Corey interviewed a bunch of them in several states over a couple of years.

COREY FIELDS: You can go into any state and talk to 20 people, and you've talked to the entire black Republican activist community.

GENE DEMBY: What he was trying to figure out is, how do they juggle their black racial identity with their Republican partisan identity?

COREY FIELDS: You know, something that people I talked to were always kind of stressing was this sort of we-walk-among-you energy among black Republicans, right? Like, we look just like you. You wouldn't know it - until you're like, what?

GENE DEMBY: I asked him, like, were there any factors that predicted black affiliation with the GOP? Like...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yeah.

GENE DEMBY: ...Was it age-related? Like, was it geographical? Was it ideology? Was it income? And he crunched a bunch of numbers. And he found that none of those things mattered, at least not all that much. What did matter, he says, was...

COREY FIELDS: You know, these attitudes around blackness, like, relationship to blackness, like, the meaning and centrality of blackness - that sort of predicted which blacks would identify as Republicans and which ones would identify as Democrat.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: What does he mean? What kinds of attitudes about blackness?

GENE DEMBY: So what he was saying was, if people said that blackness was central to their identity and being in community with black folks was important to them, then they were way, way, way less likely to identify as a Republican.

COREY FIELDS: How much blackness do you want to let into your life as a black person?

No Headline In Original

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: But that wasn't true for everybody. Like the title of his book said, it's the unexpected politics of African American Republicans. And Corey actually did find a lot of black Republicans who said that being black was integral to their politics, who talked about their politics the way Kara talks about hers. He called those people race-conscious black Republicans.

So if you think about Kara, she takes, as a given, that racism is a real thing. It's a fact of American life. Like Kara, they specifically care about the condition of black families and black businesses and black institutions. And their conservatism is informed and shaped by that. And then there's this other camp. And that's the group that we tend to hear from far more frequently. He calls that group race-blind black Republicans.

COREY FIELDS: What's interesting is, you know, the race-blind black Republicans - they feel less marginalized because they do have - they have relations with white - it's like - they don't feel alone at CPAC.

GENE DEMBY: CPAC is the Conservative Political Action Conference.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Thank you. I didn't know what that is - was. Sorry.

GENE DEMBY: He says race-blind black Republicans would say...

COREY FIELDS: Oh, I like school vouchers because the market is the best way to distribute resources, versus the race-conscious dude who's saying, I like school vouchers because black parents should be making decisions about what happened to black kids, not white administrators. Race-conscious black Republicans sort of saw their goal as changing white Republicans. Like, their goal was to sort of change the Republican establishment to make it less racist, whereas race-blind black Republicans saw their goal as changing black people.

GENE DEMBY: And he says the reasons that we hear from these race-blind black Republicans so much more often than we do the race-conscious folks has to do with the makeup of the larger Republican Party.

COREY FIELDS: Our ideas about what a black Republican looks like are fundamentally shaped by the desires and demands of white Republicans, specifically, like, gatekeepers within the party, like the people who sort of control resources. The whole thing is organized not for black people so much as for white audiences.

GENE DEMBY: And Corey's like, all right. Think about this like a literal party - not just a political party, but, like, a turn-up function situation.

COREY FIELDS: Like, oh, yeah. What party isn't improved by black people?

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter).

COREY FIELDS: More black people in, right? But the thing is they sort of construct the entryway so narrowly that only a certain kind of person can squeeze through. And so what happens is, you know, if you're a black Republican who, you know, wants to sort of foreground race and black uplift in your politics, you'll get carded at the door.

One way to think about this is, given the option to choose between a black Republican who says race doesn't matter, just work hard, and a black Republican who says black power through conservative principles, Fox News tends to call that first person.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: But now the bouncers at taco Tuesdays are...

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...All wearing MAGA hats.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

No Headline In Original

LYNNETTE HARDAWAY: My president never says anything that's stupid. And see, that's what's wrong with you left people. You all always want to be so politically correct. Well, he's not politically correct. He's honest, and we love him for his honesty.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: If you do not recognize those voices, that is Diamond and Silk. And for those of you who are unaware of Diamond and Silk, how do we describe them, Gene?

GENE DEMBY: That's a great question.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Political commentators.

GENE DEMBY: Sort of.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: YouTubers.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. That's accurate, I guess.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I think people should just Google them to get the full effects.

GENE DEMBY: I think that's right. So I asked Corey what he made of them.

COREY FIELDS: Honestly, the first - I don't know. I would say the first six to eight months that they were on the scene, I was convinced it was, like, a performance art thing that was going to, like, circle back around.

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter).

COREY FIELDS: And it was going to be, like - I was, like, oh, my God. My phone is going to be lighting up once they come out. But then it turned out that - I mean, they're - they seem pretty serious, I - and they were committed to whatever it is they're doing.

GENE DEMBY: And he said Diamond and Silk are, like, the perfect examples of the way that whiteness shapes the black Republicans that we see.

COREY FIELDS: You think about, you know, who is the person Diamond and Silk is for, right? The audience for black Republicans is often sort of concerned white Republicans - right? - like, white Republicans who might be, like, I maybe think some stuff that some people might think of as kind of racist, and I don't want to think of myself as a racist person. So, like, I don't know. Maybe this isn't the party for me. And then you have someone saying the exact same stuff who's black. And it's like, yes. It's not racist. Pull the lever.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Gene, if you see Diamond and Silk on Fox, one of the news anchors will always be like, yeah, and for those of you who think the Trump administration is a racist, white supremacist administration, what do you think, Diamond and Silk? And they'll always be like, that is not true. You know, the KKK was started by the Democrats....

GENE DEMBY: Yup.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ... And things like that.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. That's, like, literally the role they play.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "FOX AND FRIENDS")

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: So think about the implication that if you support the GOP, you must be marching in Charlottesville with Tiki torches, and you're a white supremacist. I mean, where does that argument come from?

LYNNETTE HARDAWAY: The - listen. The GOP is the party of freedom, OK? Freedom - free to...

ROCHELLE RICHARDSON: That's right.

No Headline In Original

LYNNETTE HARDAWAY: ...Think for yourself...

ROCHELLE RICHARDSON: Yeah.

LYNNETTE HARDAWAY: ...Free to do whatever you want to do. The Democratic Party - what they want to do is they want to control you. They want to have you in a slavery mindset.

GENE DEMBY: And Corey was saying that there were always black Republicans who sort of serve this purpose in more, like, subliminal ways. They were buttoned-up folks like Condi Rice and Colin Powell and commentators like Thomas Sowell, right? They didn't go about it the same way that Diamond and Silk do. Corey says Diamond and Silk are brasher and louder and always doing, like, the absolute most because they reflect this Trumpification (ph) of the GOP.

Corey said he went to a bunch of events that were thrown by some race-blind black Republican groups. You know, and those events were ostensibly about outreach to black folks about diversifying the party. But some of those organizations - the ones with, like, institutional backing from the party - they felt like astroturfing. Like, there'd be black people onstage, but only white folks in the audience in some, like, well-appointed venue. And on their websites, if you looked at the boards of those organizations, the boards would be all-white.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Surprise.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Wondering what the race-conscious black Republican activist events look like.

GENE DEMBY: So he said their events - they were a little jankier. Those are Corey's words.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh. Is he from the bay - using janky?

GENE DEMBY: He is - he used to be at Stanford. No, no. He's in the...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh, yeah, yeah. He probably got that from the bay.

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter) He said their events were done on tighter budgets. They were, like, in less - you know, less swank places. He said they were a lot of fun, actually. The music was really good. They felt like a black family reunion. But there was definitely a cash bar (laughter). At those events, he said, it was black folks reaching out to other black folks - or trying to, anyway. He said the differences in these events and these organizations show the kinds of choices that black Republicans have to make to get attention and to get resources from the wider, whiter party.

COREY FIELDS: Part of the story of being a black Republican is also the story of managing blackness in white context. (Laughter) And, like - and that's actually a dynamic a lot of black people...

(LAUGHTER)

COREY FIELDS: ...Like, have to deal with.

GENE DEMBY: Yes.

COREY FIELDS: And, like, I don't want to say it's like a placeholder for the story of, like, you know, black people in integrated spaces. But it's also not completely different from it - right? - that, like, you have to manage blackness in a way that sits comfortably with what white gatekeepers want.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh, that sounds very familiar.

GENE DEMBY: Doesn't it, though?

No Headline In Original

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: We have to deal with this all the time at a place that will remain nameless that has three letters. Anyway, this is not about us.

GENE DEMBY: It is not.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: But I get it. I get what he's saying. Anyway, back to the lecture at hand. I'm assuming there's a lot of tension between these race-blind and race-conscious black Republican activists.

GENE DEMBY: Oh, my gosh, Shereen. So Corey said that after hanging out with them, it became very clear that they do not like each other.

COREY FIELDS: I was completely thrown by the intensity of the fights, the insults and language. I've never heard more people get called an Uncle Tom than when I, like, studied black - like, talking to black Republicans, like...

GENE DEMBY: About other black...

COREY FIELDS: About other black Republicans. Like, it was just, like - yeah. (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: He was like, look. Because they're fighting over scraps of attention and resources and money, they often fight with each other more viciously than they fight with Democrats.

COREY FIELDS: The race-blind folk to the race-conscious folks - they're saying, like, how do you - can come up in somebody's house and talk s*** about them?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter) I love Corey.

GENE DEMBY: He was wonderful. I really wanted - like, I want to hang out with you. He was super smart. He said that, for the race-conscious black Republicans, they really felt this sense of rejection. They were angry at these race-blind folks who they thought were, like, sellouts. But to all the black folks in their lives who were not in the Republican Party, there was no real distinction to be made. All black Republicans - race-conscious, race-blind, whatever, whatever - they're all sellouts.

COREY FIELDS: Even among the sort of race-conscious black Republicans I talked to, like, there was definitely - you know, there was a deep sort of sadness about it - right? - and, like, this sort of forlornness of, like, I'm being misunderstood.

GENE DEMBY: And this tension that race-conscious black Republicans feel between their blackness and their Republican Party identification - it only seems to be getting more fraught. I mean, just over the summer, a Quinnipiac poll found that 80% of black respondents felt President Trump was a racist, which I guess is not surprising to anybody.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Actually, I'm surprised that it's only 80%. Did it keep growing?

GENE DEMBY: I know. I actually - yeah. It - I thought it'd be higher.

So the president represents something fundamentally different for black Republicans. And Corey said a lot of the people he talked to when he was writing his book have just reached out to him and said Trump is a bright red line that they just could not cross.

COREY FIELDS: Talking to people I initially interviewed for the project now - like, when they're sort of getting in touch with me now, they're definitely sort of saying, like, oh, I can't identify as Republican anymore - especially those who were, like, a race-conscious brand of black Republicans. They're definitely sort of sitting out the Trump administration - right? - in terms of identification.

GENE DEMBY: Just like Kara.

No Headline In Original

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Right. Well, we're going to let the audience chew on all of that for a little bit. But when we come back...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KANYE WEST: I just love Trump. That's my boy.

GENE DEMBY: What can Kanye teach us about how all of us vote?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Stay with us.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Diamond.

GENE DEMBY: Silk.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: CODE SWITCH.

GENE DEMBY: So the Republican Party has been trying to reach out to black folks for a long time. Time and time again, their efforts basically fail. So let's talk about why that is.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Well, there is the obvious, Gene. The GOP is incredibly white.

GENE DEMBY: How white is it, Shereen?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: It is so white that if it was a bride at a wedding, it wouldn't have to wear a dress.

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: It's so white, it claps on the ones and threes. It's 90% white, Gene. And now it's the party of President Donald Trump.

GENE DEMBY: Which, as we just said, is not helping. And so, for a long time, you were not automatically considered a sellout if you were a black person and a Republican. But remember how Kara's dad described Ronald Reagan?

KARA JOHNSTON: I mean, there's, like, Lucifer. And then there's, like, Ronald Reagan.

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: It's around the time of Reagan that the GOP basically becomes irradiated for most black folks.

Here's Corey Fields again.

COREY FIELDS: I mean, I think sort of, like, the Reagan era becomes, like - being black and Republican is not just, like, an alternative choice that people can make. It becomes disreputable choice that a person can make. Like, it was sort of perceived as, no, this is a campaign and this is a party that's, like, actually organized actively around anti-blackness.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: So it was Reagan. It wasn't Nixon and the Southern strategy?

GENE DEMBY: That's the beginning of this sort of thing. But it - he says it crystallizes, like, in the '80s - in the late '70s and '80s.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: So if being a black Republican becomes a very disreputable choice during the Reagan era, then being black and identifying as a Democrat becomes the expected choice.

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GENE DEMBY: Yeah, which brings us to your boy Kanye.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: My boy? Come on.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "JIMMY KIMMEL LIVE!")

KANYE WEST: Just as a musician, African American, you know - everyone around me tried to pick my candidate for me and then told me every time I said I like Trump that I couldn't say it out loud, or my career would be over. I'd get kicked out the black community because blacks are - we're supposed to have a monolithic thought. So I didn't have the confidence to take on the world and the possible backlash. And it took me a year and a half to have the confidence to stand up and put on the hat.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: That does not even sound like Kanye. He is code-switching so hard right there.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. It's very, very interesting on a bunch of levels.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: He has, like, a very tight red tie on. Anyway...

GENE DEMBY: A cardigan...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And a MAGA hat.

GENE DEMBY: ...And a MAGA hat, leather jacket.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: For those of you who don't remember, that was Kanye (laughter).

GENE DEMBY: Your boy.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And it was last year when, for several months, he was running around with a MAGA hat on, giving interviews to people about how he was a free thinker because he was supporting President Trump. He was saying all kinds of interesting things.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KANYE WEST: When you hear about slavery for 400 years - for 400 years? That sound like a choice.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: What? Every time I hear that, it's still like, what are you saying? And he was often doing this stuff with his new friend, Candace Owens, the black conservative commentator.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

CANDACE OWENS: 2016, I escaped the Democrat plantation of thought, and I want to provide the rest of you guys that were watching with a guide how to. Ready? The first thing you're going to need is Internet access. Second thing you're going to need is you're free.

GENE DEMBY: This is the same Candace Owens who was the architect of Blexit (ph).

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

CANDACE OWENS: Yes, the black exit from the Democrat Party because it's time that we stop allowing them to use us for votes and deliver none of the promises that they ensure every election cycle.

GENE DEMBY: Candace Owens was going to be, like, this black Moses in a cardigan and pearls leading an exodus of negroes out of the Democratic Party and into the loving embrace of the GOP. We reached out to her, by the way. She did not get back to us.

CANDACE OWENS: Too bad.

No Headline In Original

GENE DEMBY: But she pointed to Ye as an example. Here's this cool rap guy who is Blexiting (ph). Yeezy is Blexit, and so can you.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Did she say there's this cool rap guy?

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: It's just - that's how I imagine her saying it.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: All right. And also Blexit - I don't know. That word is weird.

GENE DEMBY: It could have used some workshopping. I mean, yeah. It wasn't - it's not the prettiest word. Anyway, surprise, surprise - none of that whole episode changed the way that black folks thought about the GOP. It definitely, though, changed the way that black folks thought about Kanye.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Indeed.

GENE DEMBY: Yes, because, I mean, he got dragged by everyone. Everybody's, like, this fool done lost his mind. And to really underline his defiance, Kanye, being Kanye, tweeted out screenshots of a text conversation he was having with John Legend in which John Legend was trying to check Kanye for associating with President Trump. And this whole, like, wave of opprobrium towards Kanye was a perfect real-world example of how some political scientists say black partisan behavior is reinforced.

CHRYL LAIRD: I am Chryl Laird. I'm an assistant professor of government and legal studies at Bowdoin College.

GENE DEMBY: Chryl and a colleague named Ismail K. White have a forthcoming book. It's called "Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior." And it's about this thing we're talking about - this powerful norm around black people voting for Democrats. It spans generations. It spans geography. As we've been talking about, it spans ideology. And she pointed to an episode of "Black-ish" to underline this point.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "BLACK-ISH")

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) Bow, we have a problem. Junior is a Republican.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) Well, that's OK.

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) What?

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) So he wants to shop at Banana Republic. They have a crazy generous return policy.

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) No, no, no. You're not getting it, all right? He's a Republican.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) A notary public. That's a noble profession. We'll save us tons of time.

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) No - Ronald Reagan, Ann Coulter, Fox News, Tea Party. No, Republican.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) Republican.

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) Yes.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) No.

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) Yes.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) No.

No Headline In Original

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) Yes.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) No.

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) Yes.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS: (As Rainbow Johnson) We don't do that, Dre. We are compassionate liberals who believe in tolerance, acceptance, open...

ANTHONY ANDERSON: (As Dre Johnson) Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. But we're black, all right? That's all that matters. We're black.

GENE DEMBY: That episode was called "Black-ish" "Elephants In The Room" (ph), by the way.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I'm so mad that we are not the first people to make that pun - joke - is it a pun?

GENE DEMBY: Is it? Yes...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Jokey pun.

GENE DEMBY: Everybody made it before us. Corey should be demanding royalties.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: Anyway, Chryl said that for a long time, people just thought that the reason black folks vote together as a bloc came from this notion first coined in the 1990s.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Woop woop (ph).

GENE DEMBY: That notion is called linked fate. And basically, it's like...

CHRYL LAIRD: The shared historical experiences of African Americans have made it so that they believe that what happens to the group has an influence on their own individual life. So basically, what is good for the group should be good for me - this idea that I believe what happens to the group has an influence on my own individual life.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: We're in this together.

GENE DEMBY: We're in this together. And the research that Chryl and others have done says that's not quite the whole story when it comes to black voting. So when they measured and tested this idea, like, a professed sense of linked fate wasn't enough to explain why black people almost never break rank in the voting booth, even when they might have powerful personal motivators and incentives to do so. So Chryl and Ismail White conducted a study about incentives and black partisanship. The researchers went to an HBCU, which they did not name. And they told a bunch of students back during the 2012 campaign, hey, we will give you \$100 for you to donate to either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee. And they told the students, you can divvy up that \$100 however you want.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: An actual Benjamin.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. Like - well, it wasn't real money because that would be against the law. And they made it clear that they weren't breaking any finance laws. But they told the students that the money was real because they wanted them to buy it. So they did this with one group.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And they gave all the money to President Obama.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. They gave most of their money to Obama.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yeah. That's not that surprising.

No Headline In Original

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. That checks out. Then they had a second group. And they were basically, like, if you give money to Mitt Romney, you get to keep some of that money. And the more money you give to Mitt Romney, the more money you get to keep.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Ah - an incentive - an incentive for college students who probably don't have a lot of money because they're college students.

GENE DEMBY: Yep.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: So give money to Romney, you get money.

GENE DEMBY: That's book money. That's meal plan money. You know I mean? This is movie money - might want a date. And so, unsurprisingly, a lot more people gave a lot more money to Mitt Romney. Like, even the people who expressed high levels of linked fate feelings broke rank when there was money on the table. So then they had a third group - again, \$100 - divvy it up however you want; Obama, Romney. We'll give you a big kickback if you donate to Romney. But what they said to this group was, oh, yeah. By the way, we're going to publish how you donated in the very popular student newspaper at this historically black college (laughter).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh. All that money went to President Obama.

GENE DEMBY: Yes.

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: Exactly. That third group basically behaved like the first group, who had no incentive whatsoever. The students in the last group were concerned that the newspaper was going to blow up their spots, and they just did not want to be there for that dragging.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Makes sense.

GENE DEMBY: Yes. And Chryl said you could find this effect in even narrower situations. She and a colleague did a study and found that the way black people describe their political affiliation changed depending on whether a black person was asking them that question.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Huh. So if a black person is doing the asking, and the question is, are you a Democrat or Republican, black people are more likely to say they're Democrats even if they are Republicans.

GENE DEMBY: Right (laughter). Yeah, depending on the race of the interviewer, they answer that question differently. They didn't want to deviate from this implied social expectation. And Chryl was saying that, you know, contrary to what Kanye is saying, this is not an issue of black folks not thinking for themselves. It's about practicality. It's about maximizing power.

CHRYL LAIRD: Right, and I want to be clear, right? Our theory is not saying that African Americans are behaving blindly. In fact, it is an incredibly strategic manner in which they are behaving in politics - more strategic than most groups you see in politics engage, where there is a clear understanding of how to leverage the group's members.

GENE DEMBY: She says that black people are really practiced in following and enforcing these norms because defection was literally a matter of life or death. She pointed to the story told by Frederick Douglass.

CHRYL LAIRD: There were instances in which people were plotting to potentially, you know, escape a plantation, that if there was one individual who was deciding to inform the master of what was going on, they would make sure that that person is brought to meet - like, they brought them to a meeting and basically was, like, we'll basically take you down.

GENE DEMBY: That sounds like a choice too, Kanye. Anyway, she stressed that voting for everyone - not just black folks - is fundamentally social behavior and influenced by the people around us. It's, like, whether we even

No Headline In Original

vote in the first place is about whether the folks around us are voters. And the way we all cast ballots or think about specific issues and our party identification is influenced by, like, where we live and stuff like that. So we feel the rewards, the social rewards, of being in line with a group, and we feel the sanctions when we aren't.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yeah. This is why politics, to me, is so much like sports and why I don't like politics, and I don't really like sports.

GENE DEMBY: (Gasping).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yeah, you heard it. You know, you're in line with your team no matter what - no matter if they move from Oakland to Las Vegas, you know, or if they move from Oakland to San Francisco...

GENE DEMBY: (Gasping).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: You're still down. You've got to be down to your team. Whatever.

GENE DEMBY: Right. And...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: You know, Chryl said you can find white evangelical churches where people don't want to break rank, and they feel the same kind of pressures. And they feel the same sort of social cachet that comes along with going along. And this is, like, important. We tend to think of people's party identification as the result - like, a consequence of the political beliefs they already hold. But it's often the opposite. People tend to belong to a party because the folks around them belong to that party, and their beliefs follow suit with the party's positions.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Human beings are social animals.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. But she says when it comes to black folks, we can enforce those norms much more effectively.

CHRYL LAIRD: Because they're in a social space where they're heavily homogenous, right? So segregation plays a big thing here, from the institution of slavery to actual Jim Crow segregation to continued segregation in residential housing - right? - those things create a homogeneous space in which that understanding of where the group is politically becomes very key.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: All signs point back to...

GENE DEMBY: #HousingSegregation in everything. Essentially, black folks vote like black Democrats because they worship with and get their hair done by and live next door to and are related to black Democrats.

CHRYL LAIRD: You could potentially be putting yourself in very detrimental circumstances if you lose your social connections because your social circle is predominantly African American.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Which brings us back to Mr. Kanye West - not that he needs any more attention, Gene. But anyway, his black friends told him, do not do it. Leave President Trump alone. That's what John Legend was doing in that text conversation. And, you know, Kanye got called out by so many people that he was in real danger of losing that one thing that all rappers need, Gene...

GENE DEMBY: What's that?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...Which is credibility.

GENE DEMBY: Yes.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter).

No Headline In Original

GENE DEMBY: And you remember, like, a few months later, Kanye was putting some distance between himself and Blexit and Candace Owens. They got into some weird beef about T-shirts and logos or something. I don't remember. Anyway, Chryl says that that's how it works, right? Kanye deviated from the expected norm. Kanye got called out by everybody and dragged by everybody. People came to collect him. Kanye fell back in line.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Ish (ph).

GENE DEMBY: Ish. Yeah, ish.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And Kanye is exactly the kind of person who can deviate from the norm, right? He's a very rich rapper with a wife who is not black, in-laws who are not black. He lives in a city called Calabasas. If you've ever seen the Kardashians, you know this city. It's out here in LA County. It is 1% black...

GENE DEMBY: Wow.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...Just like the Republican Party.

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And the only black people in Calabasas, I would bet, are dating or married to the Kardashians or the Jenners in some way.

(LAUGHTER)

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: No, I'm just kidding. So, yeah, not a lot of black folks to put direct and consistent face-to-face pressure on Mr. Kanye West.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. I guess it's like Kanye, Travis Scott, Blac Chyna.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: All the other black people in Calabasas are going to be so mad right now.

GENE DEMBY: (Laughter).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: We're going to get so many letters - like, five.

GENE DEMBY: If you (laughter) - but it sort of underlines one of the dilemmas of honest Republican outreach to black voters. Like, you would need to find black folks who have enough buy-in with other black folks and enough social connection to other black folks who can make that sell.

(SOUNDBITE OF AARON STEINBERG'S "JAZZ BEATAH")

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: We've got into some of the sociology around black Republicanism, and we just looked at some of the political science that explains why black Republicans remain such outliers. But what's it like to be one of that tiny, tiny number and hold elected office?

MIA LOVE: It's really quite interesting to be a Republican today and still trying to do everything I can to preserve the principles and the platform of the party.

GENE DEMBY: That's Mia Love. In 2014, she became the first black woman ever elected to Congress as a Republican. She represented a district in Utah. And I asked her why she thought the GOP did so poorly with black voters.

MIA LOVE: Well, you know, at the risk of criticizing a party that I love, I think that the party doesn't reach out to minority voters as much as they should. I don't know if it's fear. I don't know if it's, hey, they don't want me. This is one of the things that I have felt so strongly about. You've got to go to places that you may not think that they like you or want you. But at least show them that you care. You kind of feel like the policies are good. And the policies - I mean, they're saying the right things, but you never feel like they actually take you home. You kind of get the

No Headline In Original

sense that, you know, as you go into your friend's home, and there's smiles, and they're - but you never know what they're actually saying, or you never know if you're actually really accepted by them.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Gene, I know a little something about Mia.

GENE DEMBY: What do you know?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I know she's Haitian American. I know she's the child of immigrants. And I cannot imagine her feeling accepted in the Republican Party, especially these days.

GENE DEMBY: Hold off on that part (laughter).

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: OK.

GENE DEMBY: That's coming up. That will be relevant in a second. Remember how Kara said growing up that her father thought that Ronald Reagan was basically the devil?

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Lucifer, I believe was...

GENE DEMBY: Yes, Lucifer.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...The term. Yeah.

GENE DEMBY: Well, Mia says when her father and her mother came to the U.S. fleeing the Duvalier regime, they saw Reagan as a hero.

MIA LOVE: My dad's first vote was for Ronald Reagan. It was incredibly simple for him. He's, like, I came from Haiti, where government was everything. So to me, the policies were less government, better for me. Less government, more people - that's where I'm going for. And so the Republican ideals and the platform was something that resonated with him. My parents were incredibly religious. I went through Sunday school. I was - I had my holy communion. You know, so it - those are the things that you grew up with, valuing the sanctity of life. So there are several things that were already ingrained in me. But then it started - the detail started to come a little bit more clear as I got involved in politics in terms of identifying.

GENE DEMBY: Mia grew up Catholic, like me and you.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Like us.

GENE DEMBY: Yep.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yes.

GENE DEMBY: In college, she was a theater kid. She was around a lot of queer folks a lot. And she says that her political identification just never came up with her theater friends. And then in her early 20s, when she was working as a flight attendant and still dreaming of a Broadway career in New York, like you...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yeah (laughter), true.

GENE DEMBY: Mia converted to Mormonism. And not long after that, she decided, yo - like, I'm going to move to Utah to get closer to the Mormon culture. She met a nice, young Mormon missionary boy - a white guy. And they got married once they were in Utah.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: You know, I've always been curious about how she ended up in Utah. And I never looked that up.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah.

MIA LOVE: So thank you...

No Headline In Original

GENE DEMBY: Yeah.

MIA LOVE: ...For that. But how did she get into politics?

GENE DEMBY: So it was in Saratoga Springs where she started getting involved in local issues. In 2004, she was elected to the city council. In 2010, when she was 34, she was elected the city's mayor. And in Utah - and among the national Republican Party more broadly - she was starting to be discussed as this young Republican star on the rise. In 2012, with all this buzz around her, she decides to run for Congress. And she says that was the first time a lot of her friends back East even knew that she was a Republican.

MIA LOVE: Some of my friends in college were, like, what? Explain this to me. How did - what? Where'd that come from? What did Utah do to you?

GENE DEMBY: The Romney campaign even asked her to speak at the Republican convention. She said she was friends with Mitt Romney's son, Josh.

MIA LOVE: He said, you know, I think you'd be great. Would you want to speak at the Republican National Convention? And I said, sure. Why not?

GENE DEMBY: A quick aside, Shereen - so I was at that convention in 2012 reporting...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh.

GENE DEMBY: ...Up a story on Republican outreach to voters of color. I was walking around the hallways of that arena in Tampa just, like, all right. Let me just count how many brown people are in here right now. And so, you know, there were brown people among the arena staff. And then I walked up to one person and tapped him on the shoulder. I was, like, oh, are you a Republican? And they was, like, no. I'm a reporter looking for other people of color. And so every (laughter)...

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Oh. You found another reporter of color.

GENE DEMBY: Exactly. You've got to remember, like, at that moment, the Republican Party was trying to showcase that it wasn't, you know, this lily-white party, right? It was running against Barack Obama.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Yeah.

GENE DEMBY: And so the optics of that whiteness were just more obvious. So during the speeches on TV, the Puerto Rican delegation was, like, all the way up near the front...

(LAUGHTER)

GENE DEMBY: ...As was the Hawaiian delegation. So basically, all the brown people who were in the building - they were clustered together, and they were front and center.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And, of course, you had Mia Love on stage...

GENE DEMBY: Yeah, basically.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: ...By herself.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "WE WILL ROCK YOU")

QUEEN: (Singing) We will rock you.

MIA LOVE: When I looked out of the arena, there were a lot of cowboy hats.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

No Headline In Original

MIA LOVE: I am thrilled...

(APPLAUSE)

MIA LOVE: ...To add Utah's voice in support for Mitt Romney.

And I remember thinking in my head, game on. You know, I've got this message to deliver. I'm going to go out there, and I'm just going to speak to whoever is willing to receive it.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MIA LOVE: My parents immigrated to this country with \$10 in their pockets, filled with the possibilities of living the American dream.

(APPLAUSE)

GENE DEMBY: The GOP was really putting their muscle behind Mia Love. She was being heralded as one of the party's future stars. Mitt Romney endorsed her. His running mate Paul Ryan did. So did John Boehner, who was then the speaker of the House.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: It's like the Republican version of Obama's 2004 Democratic Convention breakout speech only eight years later.

GENE DEMBY: Not quite.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: No?

GENE DEMBY: Mia Love lost that first race in 2012. But two years later, she won.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Many of the naysayers out there said that Utah would never elect a black Republican, LDS woman to Congress.

(APPLAUSE)

GENE DEMBY: But it also kind of underlined the very different places the parties were on diversity. Shirley Chisholm, a Democrat, became the first black woman in Congress in 1969. That was 45 years before Mia Love's win. Anyway, the newly elected Mia Love didn't waste any time throwing out red meat to conservatives. At the top of her agenda was dismantling the Congressional Black Caucus from the inside.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And before we get into that - because I want to know more, explanatory comma time - the Congressional Black Caucus was founded in the 1970s for black lawmakers in either the House or the Senate. Of course, it's almost entirely made up of Democrats. The Republicans in Washington, D.C., and the CBC tend not to get along. And when there are black Republicans in Congress, they often don't join the CBC. They're rejecting what they see as the identity-based politics of the Democratic Party.

GENE DEMBY: But Mia Love was going to join the CBC. And she vowed that she was going to thwart its Democratic agenda.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: So I'm going to assume things were not that easy for her when she got to Washington.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. They didn't really rock with her.

No Headline In Original

MIA LOVE: Well, the first days were kind of hard because here I am. I'm listening to a whole lot of things. And they're talking about my colleagues and how horrible they are and what they're doing. And I'm just back there listening. And it's funny because there are times where we had to kind of set up a code of conduct. So when they really wanted to get into Democrat policies and different things like that, they would end the Congressional Caucus meeting. And then I would just leave.

GENE DEMBY: They didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, as you might imagine. But she says that over time, things started to cool down a little bit. They at least stopped the side-eying each other at first. And then they started showing her the ropes, like how to get work done in Congress, how to work on legislation. You know how she says that the Democrats used to pause the CBC meetings and wait for her to leave? Well, they stopped doing that.

MIA LOVE: It got to the point where I didn't have to leave. Like, they never ended it because they trusted me. The congressional caucus is a nonpartisan caucus, by the way - the Congressional Black Caucus. So it's not supposed to be Democrat. I was - happened to be the only Republican on that caucus, so I became the voice of the Congressional Black Caucus in the GOP Congress.

GENE DEMBY: And then this legitimately weird thing started to happen. Mia Love, who was this red-meat-throwing, conservative woman from, you know, an all-white district in Utah, and the CBC, which is made up of black Democrats who represent a lot of black constituents - they developed this unlikely and genuinely warm relationship. Mia Love started working with them on issues like immigration. And she says that she started to think of the other CBC members as, like, her legitimate friends. Marcia Fudge, a representative from Cleveland, who was also the CBC's chair - she says Marcia Fudge was like a mentor to her. David Scott, who was a Democratic representative from Georgia, even gave money to Mia Love's reelection campaigns.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: What? Wow.

GENE DEMBY: I mean, some Democrats were apparently not very happy about that.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter).

GENE DEMBY: But then there was this weird dynamic in which members of the CBC were, like, quietly sticking up for her during her most recent campaign as she was running against one of their fellow Democrats.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: (Laughter) Wow.

GENE DEMBY: So around the time when all this was happening, she says, if the Republican leadership asked her to attack the CBC, she just would not do it.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: So she went from wanting to dismantle the Congressional Black Caucus from the inside to being a productive and respected member of the CBC. That is interesting. It sounds to me like a textbook case of - I don't know - if you can't beat them, join them.

GENE DEMBY: Or to think about what Corey was saying, right? - like, maybe just proximity changes the way you get down on people not just because you feel like you got to fall in line. But, like, maybe there's a genuine affinity, you know? I don't know.

So during the midterms last year in 2018, BuzzFeed ran a story with the headline, quote, "Black Democratic Lawmakers Want To Beat Every Republican Except One." That one was Mia Love.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: But that was a while back. And we've been talking throughout this entire episode about how President Trump has really thrown a wrench into the works for black Republicans. So I'm wondering how that worked out for Mia. What's her relationship with President Trump?

GENE DEMBY: OK, yeah. So about that...

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MIA LOVE: I would say the relationship ebbed and flowed. So it was - sometimes, it was great. Sometimes, it was frustrating. A lot of times, it was frustrating. And I think that there's some places where I'm just indifferent.

GENE DEMBY: And then s***hole-gate.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

DAVID GREENE: Let's sum up President Trump's message on immigration yesterday. And I want to warn you, according to our sources, he used a word that might offend you. He asked why the United States should welcome immigrants from s***hole countries.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: We've already established that Mia Love's parents are from Haiti. And Haiti is one of the countries that President Trump referred to as a s***hole country. So things, obviously, got personal for her. We also know that the president said a bunch of other things about other groups on the campaign trail. But I guess this time, things really hit home for Mia.

GENE DEMBY: Yeah. And I actually asked her how she heard about those comments from the president.

MIA LOVE: I was on a plane. I was on a plane, and I was getting all of these texts. And again, I gave the administration the benefit of the doubt. I sent emails to everybody that I knew, and crickets - got nothing. And by the way, that was after I let the first phrase go - all Haitians have AIDS. And so Robin, who's a great friend of mine, also on the CBC - she's like, did you hear that? I was like, I have no idea if that's true or not. And I let that go. And then finally, you know, we came to this point. And I said, they need to respond to me at least. And so I gave them the opportunity to do that. And I was not going to let somebody who is a member of our party get away with that. I feel like I need to hold everyone accountable. I believe - and especially the struggles that my parents went through - that was a - it was a slap across the face. There was no way I was going to allow that to happen.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: I remember she called President Trump's comments racist. I don't know if she was the only Republican to do that, but I remember that she did that.

GENE DEMBY: And while all this was happening, the Republicans were gearing up for some really tough midterms. And so by the time November rolled around last year, Mia Love, along with 23 other Republicans in the House, lost their seats. Mia Love lost her seat by just under 700 votes. It was really, really close. But the day after the midterms when, you know, President Trump is giving a postmortem or whatever, he gloated that Mia Love would've won had she just been nicer to him.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DONALD TRUMP: Mia Love - she called me all the time to help her. But Mia Love gave me no love, and she lost - too bad. Sorry about that, Mia.

GENE DEMBY: Mia Love actually brought those comments up in her concession speech that night.

(SOUNDBITE OF SPEECH)

MIA LOVE: The president's behavior towards me made me wonder, what did he have to gain by saying such a thing about a fellow Republican? It was not really about asking him to do more, was it? Or was it something else? Well, Mr. President, we'll have to chat about that. However, this gave me a clear vision of his world as it is. No real relationships - just convenient transactions. That is an insufficient way to implement sincere service and policy.

GENE DEMBY: She went on to say, quote, "this election experience and these comments shines a spotlight on the problems Washington politicians have with minorities and black Americans. It's transactional. It's not personal."

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: That's interesting to me because this very personal experience seems like it's what opened Mia Love's eyes to the tension between being a Republican and a POC.

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GENE DEMBY: Just a few years before, Mia Love was being heralded as one of the future faces of the GOP - you know, a party that was nodding - at least nodding - towards the idea that it needed to court voters who were not white people. And now, two years into the Trump era, she was out of office. I asked her, like, what do you think this moment augurs for the future of your party?

MIA LOVE: I see Republicans going in two different directions. One is Republicans that are going to defend the administration at all costs, right? Doesn't matter - this is who the president is. This is - they're going to do everything they possibly can to defend anything or justify anything. Then you get the other group that says, you know what? I cannot allow myself to be associated with this type of leadership, so I'm going to leave the party because if this is the leader of our party, I don't want to have anything to do with that.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: So where does Mia Love stand?

GENE DEMBY: She said there's actually a third way.

MIA LOVE: And that is to stay in the party and to defend and uphold the principles that you believe in. Hold everyone accountable. I can tell you right now, I can guarantee that I've been a Republican longer than the president has, so I'm not going to leave my party because there's somebody there that I, you know, don't agree with all the time. As a matter of fact, there's more credibility if you sit, and you say, sorry. These are not the things we believe in. But I'm going to have to call you out when you're going against that. I would do that to any of my colleagues.

GENE DEMBY: After Mia Love lost her reelection bid last year, there were only two black Republicans in Congress. There was Will Hurd, a representative from Texas, and Tim Scott, the senator from South Carolina. Well, just last month, Will Hurd announced that he would not be running for reelection, meaning the number of black Republicans in Congress will soon be down to one.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LUCIFER")

UNIDENTIFIED SINGER: (Singing) Lucifer, son of the morning, I'm going to chase you out of Earth.

GENE DEMBY: All right, y'all. That's our show.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And remember the songs giving us life? I know we haven't done that in a while. But there are two Jay-Z tracks warring to be the song giving us life, in my opinion. I mean, I feel like we said Lucifer a number of times in this episode. We also refer to Kanye West a bunch. So I feel like Jay-Z's "Lucifer" from his "Black Album" produced by Kanye West really is the song that should be giving us life.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LUCIFER")

JAY-Z: (Singing) ...Murder me, so I gotta murder them first. Emergency, doctors performing procedures. Jesus, I ain't trying to be facetious...

GENE DEMBY: Actually, Shereen, I was thinking a little bit more on the news in that I was thinking of Nas' "Black Republican," featuring Jay-Z.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "BLACK REPUBLICAN")

JAY-Z: (Rapping) ...Black Republican, money I've got coming in. Can't turn my back on the hood, I've got love for them. Can't clean my act up for good, too much thug in him.

NAS: (Rapping) Probably end up back in the hook, I'm, like, fuck it, then. I feel like a black militant taking over the government. Can't turn my back on the hood, too much love for them. Can't clean my act...

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GENE DEMBY: And we just need to be clear here that these songs might be giving us life, but the people responsible for them are **not**. Please follow us on Twitter. We're @NPRCodeSwitch. We want to hear from you. Our email's codeswitch@npr.org Subscribe to the podcast on NPR One or wherever you get your podcasts.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: This episode was produced by Maria Paz Gutierrez, Jess Kung and Sami Yenigun. It was edited by Sami and Steve Drummond.

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SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Our new intern is Angela Vang (ph).

GENE DEMBY: And special thanks to Leah Wright Rigueur, Julian Wamble, Ismail White and Corinne McConnaughey for all their insight and expertise and **help** on this episode.

I'm Gene Demby.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: And I'm Shereen Marisol Meraji.

GENE DEMBY: Be easy, y'all.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI: Peace.

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