

# FOUNDERS, ENTREPRENEURS, AND ACTIVISTS

## A Personal Look at Race and Gender

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Up until late last night I was going to begin my remarks by saying that I never really felt the effects of gender before going into business. I was going to talk about the women who raised me in Jamaica—when I was young they were literally superheroes to me. No one could tell me that my mother didn't know everything, that my grandmother couldn't do everything. I was going to mention my summers in high school, spent at college programs and one in particular: "Women in Engineering" at the University of Maryland, College Park, that included trips to visit different female engineers working in their fields.

At Yale issues of gender were far from my mind except when they came up during theoretical discussions in class; I guess I have the women who came before me to thank for being able to have that experience.

What I did feel at Yale was race and class. I spent a lot of time working in the dining halls with low-income minorities who did not go to Yale. I worked at the Public Defender's Office and

tutored at the Juvenile Detention Center, both places over-represented by low-income minorities. I was definitely aware of and uncomfortable with my position of privilege as a black person at Yale in New Haven.

I was going to continue by describing how issues of gender have come up only since becoming an entrepreneur—gender issues have come up in mostly negative ways and have complicated the process of running my business. It's been very surprising how much sexual innuendos and outright propositions are a part of business communication. It really caused me to question myself: Was it me? Was it my clothes? Am I flirting without knowing it? Is that even possible? For a while, I was really unsure of what to do and kept checking and rechecking myself. Am I overreacting? Underreacting? Am I burning this bridge? Should I even be talking to this guy?

But thinking back last night, I remembered how gender came up before, how it had affected me. At the juvenile detention center where I used to tutor I became pretty close to one girl. At the end of each session we would just talk and the conversation would always get around to her counseling me (unsolicited of course) on my clothes, my hair, the way I talked: "You don't act like a woman; don't you want a man?"

My mother and grandmother, the superheroes, said to me throughout my life: "I can't wait until you start dressing like a girl"; my aunt: "I can't picture you with a man, you're too argumentative, they don't like that."

So it's not correct that I've experienced the effects of gender only since going into business. What is true is that until going into business gender was only present in my personal space. My work/academic career had always been gender neutral. In fact, I think that if I was going to be black, it helped that I was a woman—while I was an undergraduate the black female to black male ratio was 3 to 1. Race was always there but I knew how to deal with it. In high school we had to fight for me to take honors classes. I have always been politically active.

It wasn't until I started thinking about my gender similar to how I thought of my race that I was able to deal with the problems I was having in my business. Basically, it's less about me and more about the person I'm dealing with. It's my job to take care of my business and I should simply ignore/avoid when I could or fight back if I had to.

The ways I was able to deal with negative issues of race and gender was by knowing and being secure in what I want, what I am good at and what I enjoy. My privilege is that I had opportunities to find out that knowledge for myself and have had support from my family, educational institutions, and my business partner. I also think that having grown up somewhat outside of overwhelming influences of TV and other corporate advertising helps.

To go back to my stylist extraordinaire, Nicole, in the detention center, at 15 she could not imagine a life for herself outside of this city and outside of abusive relationships. She spoke about Branford as if it were Brazil. Most of her education has come from TV and music and she's not watching the Discovery Channel or listening to NPR—corporate advertising.

We created Aerolith, formed a corporation, because we think that's the best way to reach people like Nicole, who are in many ways our target audience. Make good entertainment; provide media training in an attempt to demystify the production process so that they can see for themselves the work and motivations that go into advertising and media. We worked with 20 teenagers this past summer and hope that we can do this type of work on a larger scale.