

**Direct Action, Education, Consciousness-Raising, Activism and the Internet:
Methods for Combating Street Harassment**

Street Harassment and Racism: A few pieces of literature addressed issues of race and street harassment. Martha Langelan writes in *Back Off!* that women of color “often experience a combination of sexual and racial harassment, sometimes within a single incident, and they have played both a historical and a contemporary role in creating strategies for resistance.”¹ Hawley Fogg-Davis and Cynthia Grant Bowman both specifically discuss the experiences of African American women with street harassment.² When white men are the harassers, the harassment can be particularly humiliating to black women because it evokes a long history of disrespect and degradation by white men, particularly during the slave era when black female slaves could be treated as the sexual slaves of their white masters. When black men are the harassers, the authors viewed the men as participating in a “raced patriarchy” that gives them the space and power to intimidate, shame, and humiliate black women.³ Fogg-Davis and Bowman also discuss how men might use racial slurs and racial stereotypes in combination with sexual harassment to further intimidate and humiliate women of color or women not perceived as “white.”

In examining case law regarding street harassment from the twentieth century, Bowman found disturbingly racist outcomes. For example, in a case in North Carolina, the Supreme Court upheld the assault conviction of a black man who harassed a white teenage girl on the street saying his indecent language “as a matter of common

¹ Martha Langelan, *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers* (New York: Fireside Press, 1993), 32.

² Diedre Davis’s article “The Harm That Has No Name: Street Harassment, Embodiment, and African American Women” (1997) certainly addresses race in street harassment too but I was never able to access the article despite my best efforts, so I was unable to use any of its data in this paper.

³ Cynthia Grant Bowman, “Street Harassment and the Informal Ghettoization of Women,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 3 (January 1993), 533-534; see also Hawley Fogg-Davis, “A Black Feminist Critique of Same-Race Street Harassment,” Presentation at the Philadelphia Political Theory Workshop, University of Pennsylvania, 30 September 2005, <http://www.polisci.upenn.edu/programs/theory/Fogg-Davis.pdf> (20 October 2006), 24.

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knowledge, would create apprehension and fear” in a white girl. However, courts in general have been likely to conclude that a white man is honestly and innocently mistaken if he believes a black woman on the street is a prostitute and therefore she should not be offended or alarmed by his proposal.⁴ From these kinds of cases, Bowman concluded that women must overcome both sexism and racism in the legal system before being able to employ it effectively to combat the harassment of women on the streets.⁵

During Laura Beth Nielsen’s study of street harassment, she found that harassment in public is complicated by multiple hierarchies where an individual may be privileged or disadvantaged by identity of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, or socioeconomic status. A poor man harassing a wealthy woman transcends her socioeconomic privilege over him to enact his gender privilege. Similarly, a man of color can transcend a white woman’s race status by enacting his gender privilege over her. In light of these intersectionalities, a woman of color, particularly one who is poor and/or homosexual, will be the most disadvantaged and the most susceptible to all levels of street harassment.⁶ Nielsen concludes during her study that “racist and sexist speech are linked to broader hierarchies of race and sex, and that such comments do serious harm to individual targets and vulnerable groups in society.”⁷

⁴ Bowman, 13.

⁵ Bowman, 13.

⁶ Laura Beth Nielsen, *License to Harass: Law, Hierarchy, and Offensive Public Speech* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 34-35.

⁷ Nielsen, 17.

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From My Data: Throughout my data collection, there were numerous examples of the intersectionality of racism and sexual harassment. I did not ask any questions specific to race in my [online survey](#) of 225 people and no one volunteered any information relating to race in the open ended questions. However, among the 706 anti-street harassment website postings I read and at the Street Harassment Summit Workshop I attended there were discussions of racism.

During a workshop at the Street Harassment Summit in New York, everyone was asked to relay a recent experience with street harassment and two women shared examples that were a combination of sexism and racism. The following text was taken from notes I took when one woman spoke about her experience:

“Street harassment is a huge part of my day and it makes me very angry and I think it’s always tied in with my racial identity. The worst thing that happened to me lately was I was on my way to work at a new job and I was very happy, and this guy said something to me and I kept walking and he came up around me in my face and said, ‘You look just like Bin Laden’s sister.’ My mouth was closed, and I was like, why aren’t I responding? He continued to scream at me and I kept walking, and he said, ‘You should get home, women like you don’t work. Don’t your men keep you locked up? Oh that’s right, your men aren’t real men. I’ll show you what a real man is.’ And he proceeded to tell me the actions that real men do to their women. People on the street were stopped and were staring at me but no one said anything.”

The following text is from the notes I took when the second woman spoke about a recent experience she had:

“There were tons of people around and I didn’t even see the person, I had my sunglasses on and he said to me something like, it happened really, really fast, he just said all this stuff: ‘Oh you’re really beautiful. Then he’s like what? You don’t like me because I’m black?’ He’s like, ‘you’re racist, fuck all white people.’ I was like what? But

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then the first thing I thought was I'm not white, I'm mixed."

In the postings on the anti-street harassment websites, people discussed race in a few different ways. Some women noted racism in their experiences with street harassment, usually citing how they were called racial slurs when they did not react favorably toward the harasser. Women who were African American, Asian American, and Anglo American all reported being recipients of such slurs. For example, a woman who was trying to read a book on a subway while being harassed by a nearby passenger was wrote on a HollaBack NYC posting that she was called "nothing but a white racist" for asking and telling him repeatedly to stop talking to her.

A few African American women wrote about their general experiences with street harassment as related to race. For example, one woman wrote on the Street Harassment Project's website:

"As a black woman, I'm not going to keep grinning and going along to get along. No other race of woman has to endure the defeminization that goes along with being forced to accept sexual aggression from strangers, as a social norm. Every time it happens, I'm going to say something. If the harassers get enough negative responses, they will stop or at least slow down. Boys may be boys, but I refuse to give up my modesty and dignity."

Another woman on the Street Harassment Project website wrote:

"I decided to do a google search for black women and sexual harassment because I am sick of this shit! Growing up in Nigeria being grabbed and harassed on the streets and in the market, coming here being leered at in Philadelphia. It's everywhere! The worse one is because I have short natural hair, I get these stupid bastard men coming to me and talking about how nice my hair is."

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Another woman wrote about her experience being harassed by a black man:

“There were two black guys handing out those free newspapers at the station's steps. One of the guys thrusts the paper towards me when I didn't take it he said "psst, yeah, dreadlocks." I'm a young black woman who wears my hair in locs, I was so angry because he has no business speaking to me like that, it's totally unprofessional, he's just suppose to hand out papers with a good-morning and that's it. ...I also felt because I was a black woman and he was black, he felt he could talk to me anyway he wanted to and when I challenged him he couldn't handle it. I can't be a non-confrontational victim to this type of treatment.”

Around 28 postings out of the 706 mentioned the race of the harasser and most of these also mentioned their own race to show the comparison. A few additional posters also mentioned the race of the men who usually harassed them, often prefacing it by saying they did not consider themselves to be racist, but in their experience the harassers were usually from this certain race due to cultural differences, etc; the races was most frequently cited in this way were Hispanic, then African American. The following are three examples from the Street Harassment Project's website:

“I am a 27 year old Asian-American female and I am writing to share my awful [sic] experience with mostly black and Latino men on the streets of New York. I am not being bias by pointing them out, I'm just telling straight from my personal experience because I rarely encounter any kind of harassment from Asian and Caucasian men. I do recognize the difference in culture, custom, education, social standing and class, however, regardless of all of these, I feel that it ultimately boils down to respect.”

“I know I should feel sorry for these men. Most of them are black or Latino, young, uneducated and have nothing to look forward to in life. I am of Indian descent so know some of the racism that they must face every day of their lives. But it is getting harder and harder [to handle the harassment from them].”

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‘I work in a Chassidic community in Brooklyn. Black and Latino laborers and delivery men around here harrass me constantly. I chalked it up to the fact that while Jewish, I don't dress quite like the women in the area, and inadvertently call attention to myself by that fact. The other day I was the only non-Chassidic woman in a very, very, very busy store, and a Latino man brushed his hand against me in a very unkosher way. I was so stunned I couldn't speak.... It's racist, sure, but not on my part. It's racist because it's our culture that keeps many men uneducated and poor, ready to harass women who are made vulnerable by the unwillingness of society to protect us.’

In response to reading these kinds of comments, a few other people posted that they did not think culture/race made any difference; men of every race/culture had harassed them in different situations and locations. For example, one of the postings on Street Harassment Project website said,

“Alot [sic] of the women seem way too concerned with the race of the offender. I've been harassed countless times by white, black, red, yellow (insert color here) men and the thing that sticks out in my mind the most is that they were ASSHOLES. It's not a color/culture thing. It's an abuse of power and demonstration of disrespect.”