The State of AI Ethics
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> The problems at the forefront of AI Ethics today – injustice, discrimination and retaliation – are battles that marginalized communities have been fighting for decades. It only took us millions of dollars and immense public interest into our darling technology to notice. Algorithms manifest and further exacerbate the structural inequalities in our society. We're finally starting to see 'bias' – algorithmic or otherwise – for what it really is: a fundamentally human problem.

KATLYN TURNER, DANIELLE WOOD, CATHERINE D'IGNAZIO

THE
ABUSE AND MISOGYNOIR*
PLAYBOOK

1

A BLACK WOMAN MAKES A
CONTRIBUTION

- Uses tools of society
- Advances knowledge
- Reveals inequity, truth
- Changes status quo
- Is unacceptable in some way to dominant class & stakeholders

2

DOMINANT CLASS & STAKEHOLDERS RESPOND WITH
DISBELIEF

- "How could you have done/made this?"
- "How can this be true?"
- "This can't be right."

5

REVISIONISM

- New narrative
- Negative reaction to reminders of contributions
- Loss of original knowledge over generations
- Leads to genuine unawareness over time of original events

3

CONTINUED DISBELIEF

A. DISMISSAL

- "This isn't important."
- "Moving on..."
- Business as usual
- Ignores

BELIEF

B. GASLIGHTING

- "You must be mistaken."
- "This isn't actually what happened."
- Makes contributor seem crazy and isolated in views
- Uses pity, sympathy as weapon

BELIEF

C. DISCREDITING

- "This isn't as big of a deal as they claim."
- "This isn't as important as they claim."

4

ERASURE

- Moves on in news cycle, company statements
- No longer mentions contributor
- Gatekeeps contributor from further contributions
- Silences contributor and those who agree

* *Misogynoir*, a term coined by Dr. Moya Bailey in 2010, describes the particular form of anti-Black sexism faced by Black women
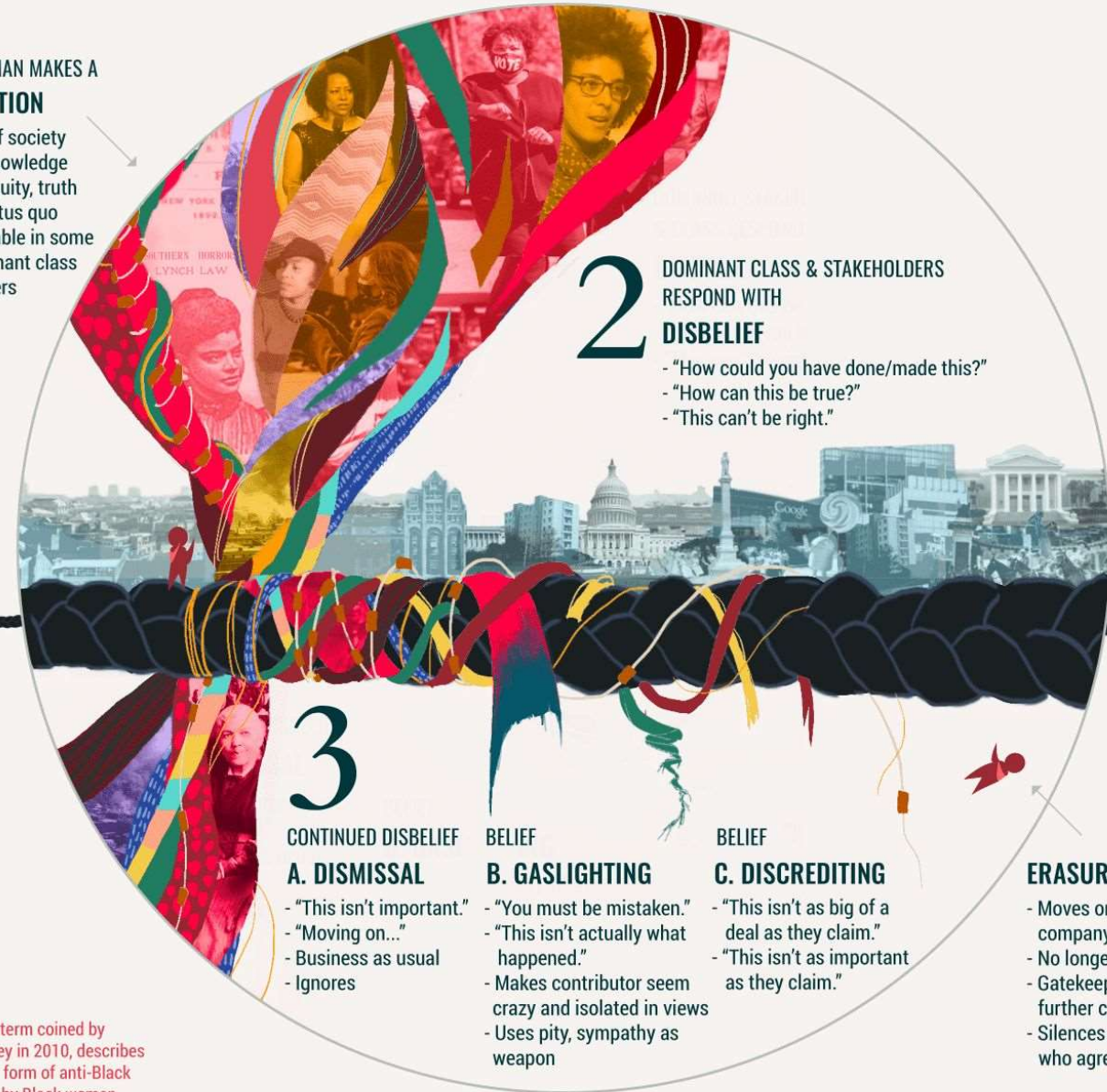
DESIGN: MELISSA 青 TENG

The Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook diagram by Katlyn Turner, Danielle Wood, and Catherine D'Ignazio. Design by melissa 青 teng.

1. The Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook

By Katlyn Turner, Danielle Wood, Catherine D'Ignazio

Disbelieving, devaluing, and discrediting the contributions of Black women has been the historical norm. Let's write a new playbook for AI Ethics.

"...come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed."

- Lucille Clifton

In the past decade, Black women have been producing leading scholarship that challenges the dominant narratives of the AI and Tech industry: namely that technology is ahistorical, "evolved", "neutral" and "rational" beyond the human quibbles of issues like gender, class, and race. Safiya Noble demonstrates how search algorithms routinely work to dehumanize Black women and girls (Noble 2018). Ruha Benjamin challenges what she calls the "imagined objectivity" of software and explains how Big Tech has collaborated with unjust systems to produce "the New Jim Code", software products that work to reproduce racial inequality (Benjamin 2019). Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru definitively expose racial and gender bias in facial analysis libraries and training datasets (Buolamwini & Gebru 2018). Meredith Broussard challenges the "technochauvinism" embedded in AI and machine learning products (Broussard 2018). Rediet Abebe calls for us to confront the limitations of the concept of fairness and center our analysis on power (Kasy & Abebe 2020). Simone Browne teaches us that today's cutting-edge technologies are part of a long history of surveillance of Black bodies in public spaces (Browne 2015).

These scholars, along with many others, are sounding the alarm that tech is neither neutral nor ahistorical. Rather, how *evolved* it is reflects how quickly it can reproduce and entrench our historical biases. How *rational* it is indicates our collective desire to forget and erase the ugliness of racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia — and assign it instead to an opaque algorithm and output. And these instincts are far from *ahistorical*, rather they are part of a centuries-old

playbook employed swiftly and authoritatively over the years to silence, erase, and revise contributions and contributors that question the status quo of innovation, policy, and social theory.

The Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook, as we name it here, has been used successfully by individuals and institutions to silence, shame, and erase Black women and their contributions for centuries. *Misogynoir* is a term introduced by Dr. Moya Bailey in 2010 (Bailey and Trudy, 2018; Bailey 2021) that describes the unique racialized and gendered oppression that Black women systemically face. We see the Playbook in operation in the recent well-publicized and swift firing of Google's Ethical AI Co-Lead, Dr. Timnit Gebru. We see the Playbook in operation in the case of poet Phillis Wheatley in the 1700s. The Playbook's tactics, described in the accompanying diagram, are **disbelief**, **dismissal**, **gaslighting, discrediting**, **revisionism**, and **erasure of Black women and their contributions**.

Google Fires, Discredits, Dismisses, Gaslights and Attempts to Silence Internationally Recognized AI & Ethics Researcher Dr. Timnit Gebru

Until December 2020, Dr. Timnit Gebru was the Staff Research Scientist and Co-Lead of Ethical Artificial Intelligence (AI) team at Google. Dr. Gebru has been long respected both in and beyond the field of AI Ethics for her insightful contributions to the space — often focusing on the uncanny details of how we live, how we choose to present ourselves, what we don't say — and what it says about us in the bigger picture of society. Her groundbreaking paper *(Gebru, Krause, Wang, Chen, Deng, Lieberman Aiden, and Fei-Fei 2017)* on the political preferences of Americans and its link to the cars we choose to drive was not just a sharp use of Google Earth and satellite data, but a subtle commentary on how the choices we make as consumers say more about us than whether we prefer to drive a pickup truck or a hybrid. Dr. Gebru is well-known for her work on bias in algorithms in machine learning, has authored numerous scholarly papers, and collaborated with leading experts and institutions. She is also a high-profile champion of diversity, equity and inclusion in the AI and machine learning communities. Together with Rediet Abebe, Dr. Gebru founded Black in AI, a group for Black people to build community and collaborations while working on artificial intelligence research. Following her graduation from Stanford University and the publication of such groundbreaking work, Dr. Gebru was employed as the Technical Co-Lead for Google's Ethical AI team, a position that led many — both in the field and outsiders — to give the team and the company credibility over its stated commitment to ethics and justice in AI.

Dr. Gebru was fired in December 2020 over a paper that she co-wrote titled, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?" The paper outlines risks posed by

large-scale language models, including potential ecological harms, misuse by bad actors, and lack of transparency. While initially approved through Google's internal review process, leadership later reversed its decision and demanded that Dr. Gebru and co-authors retract it from being published. When Dr. Gebru wrote to request answers about this censorship and demand accountability, she was "resignated", a term coined by her team to describe her firing that Google subsequently and fallaciously described as a "resignation."

Dr. Timnit Gebru's firing is a use of the Playbook that we can't look away from. It produced collective outrage in the form of thousands of signatures to a petition, a Congressional letter to Google, and the firm being dropped by HBCU recruiters. Yet many of us are unaware that the tactics used to silence and erase Dr. Gebru and her contributions are part of a centuries old pattern. Until we recognize these actions for what they are, and name them, we will be stuck in a pattern that precludes all progress towards true ethics, equity, and justice.

The Timeless Tactics of the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook

Throughout the history of the United States, the march toward true justice and equity has not been a linear, steady, or constant thread. Rather, much like water boiling in a kettle, small bubbles questioning everyday injustice, inequity, and the status quo rise up — insignificant at first, until overwhelmingly a rolling boil demanding change whistles out, and the nation responds to this chorus: culturally and judicially. The nation was founded as a British colony upholding settler colonialism, *de facto* and *de jure* segregationist racism, and patriarchal misogyny (Collins 1990; Kendi 2016). In the early days of the republic, the only members endowed with the full rights of citizenship and participation in the governance of the budding country were landowning white men — with ideas about self-governance and participation drawing from models of antiquity like the ancient Romans. Over time, many fought passionately and bitterly to form a "more perfect Union" that systemically included and recognized the humanity, rights, and citizenship of "all": Black people, Indigenous Peoples, women, immigrants and people of non-white ethnicities, LGBTQ people, and those who practice religions other than Christianity. Though mainstream attitudes around these issues have changed over the country's history, all of these fights continue today (Ortiz 2018).

The fight to end enslavement and gain citizenship for Black people cost trillions of dollars, a forever-changed economy, and over 600,000 lives including that of President Abraham Lincoln (Mullen and Darity 2020). The cause for women's suffrage gained momentum over eighty years and thousands of voices to produce the 19th amendment (Crawford 2001). The call for equality, protection, and freedom under the law to love independent of gender demanded centuries of action, both clandestine and in the open, and cost countless literal and figurative lives — until a seemingly innocuous and humble court case for a loving widower to have the dignity of legal

recognition of his deceased husband reached the United States Supreme Court and made marriage equality the law of the land. The issues surrounding equity and justice in STEM, Big Tech, and AI will undoubtedly follow a similar bubbling path: as voices gather, actions mount, knowledge is learned, sacrifices — willing and unwilling — are made, and the people demand sweeping change. We can take heart that the path our field is on now is part of a long tradition of questioning, perfecting, and ensuring that reality reflects our timelessly stated ideals: justice for all. And as part of that process, we can name and root out dynamics that have long been employed to preclude, erase, and silence progress.

From the United States' beginnings, Black women have been uniquely situated at the bottom of a gendered, racial, and class-based hierarchy that systematically dehumanized them and aimed to strip them of dignity (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 2017; Taylor 2017). Racialized capitalism (Kelley 2017; Ortiz 2018) and segregationist ideas (Kendi 2016) about the supposed inferiority of Africans and the "Negro race" ensured the legal status of Black people in the United States for hundreds of years was relegated to chattel slavery as a means to a permanent supply of cheap labor (Mullen and Darity 2020). This economic racism robbed individuals of their rights to autonomy, self-determination, citizenship, protection, and freedom. The legal regimes upholding this caste included measures to criminalize actions such as religious gatherings and literacy, and stripped Black people of their rights: to bear arms, to protect themselves, to speak freely, to secure property, and to advocate for their presents and futures — individually or as a collective. Similarly, women have faced systemic struggles targeting their autonomy, independence, and protections. Women's right to vote was legalized only a hundred years ago (Crawford 2001), the right to financial independence only legalized in the 1960s, and measures such as the Violence Against Women Act only became law in the 1990s.

As groups, Black people and women have faced similar types of limitations on their rights, as well as a sustained struggle for equal rights and protection under the law. However, a crucial difference between these two groups is related to their perceived value and roles in society, and understanding this difference is key to understanding *misogynoir* — the unique racialized and gendered oppression that Black women systemically face[1]. As a group, Black people have been cast as laborers: untrustworthy and irresponsible with their own lives and futures, but strong capable workers when under organized (white) direction. Their racial status as cheap laborers dehumanized them, relegated them to the status of property, and did not afford them protection even as they built and engineered the country, raised the children of the white elite, and were considered the ideal domestic servant. In contrast, women, particularly white

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[1] For further reading on these issues, see: Bailey, Moya. Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance. New York University Press, 2021. hooks, bell. Ain't I A Woman: Black women and feminism. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.; Davis, Angela Y. Women, race, & class. Vintage, 2011.; Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, ed. How we get free: Black feminism and the Combahee River Collective. Haymarket Books, 2017.

women, have been seen as a protected class: to be honored, to be revered, to be treated kindly, and to be guarded from both perceived and actual harm (Friedan 1964). For (white and white-adjacent) women, this protection comes at a price: adhering to the arbitrary and persnickety standards of femininity, which has included giving up one's autonomy and any desire for intellectual pursuits, suppressing any proclivities not deemed "ladylike", and ideally focusing entirely on being a proper object — someone's wife, mother, or daughter — rather than a nuanced individual subject. Despite gains from the advent of mainstream awareness and advocacy around feminism, women are still punished societally for activities not deemed feminine — being too assertive, too competent in areas unrelated to child-rearing and caregiving, being insufficiently feminine in their outward appearance (Mullany 2010), or even running for President (Wilz 2016).

Black women were not afforded the protections typically afforded to white women in exchange for the "price" of femininity; nor were they expected or allowed to be traditionally feminine (Cottom 2018). Rather, enslaved Black women in the United States were expected to be dutiful, loyal, and selfless laborers in chief. Everything from agricultural duties to domestic labor to sexual exploitation was their "responsibility" to endure. Black women were placed in a role as a thankless workhorse: to birth more Black children into slavery, to raise and nurse children who were not their own, to competently manage a household, toil on plantation crops, and to comply when desired by any white man. For this brutal role, the price Black women were expected to pay was silence and complicity: an expectation that they would work tirelessly in all facets of the plantation system when demanded, and that they would neither complain nor fight back against this system even when it brutally and violently dehumanized them and their loved ones. This unique brand of oppression is misogynoir, and far from a historical relic, it is alive and well today (Cabrera 2016). Though Black women, like white women, face penalties and are policed on their femininity and their assertiveness, the ultimate societal taboo and danger for Black women is not being too feminine or too competent, but being too loud: to use one's voice to speak truth, or to advocate for oneself and one's community — rather than to obey and serve. While white women using their voice in a similar way may be perceived as annoyances (at worst), or as morally righteous (at best), Black women who do so often face retribution in the way of the abusive tactics we describe herein, or worse.

Despite the abuse Black women have suffered at the hands of misogynoir, many throughout history have made vital contributions to lasting justice and equity, often at their own erasure or even peril. Black women's contributions have set precedents across disciplines and society: from Harriet Tubman's [raid on the Combahee River](#) freeing hundreds of enslaved African Americans, to Tarana Burke's creation of the now viral and mainstream [#MeToo movement](#). However, society has not often reacted warmly to the contributions of Black women,

particularly when those contributions challenge the status quo that keeps them in a uniquely vulnerable position.

In fact, the reactions from society to contributions from Black women are so much of a pattern, that we describe them here as a Playbook. The Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook functions in the short term to use abusive tactics such as **gaslighting**, **dismissal**, and **discrediting** to **erase** and invalidate the **contributions** of Black women that challenge the status quo and aim to advance justice. These tactics often end up harming the women themselves, which may serve as a convenient deterrent for potential future truth tellers. In the long term, the impacts of this Playbook are even more devastating: the erasure of valuable contributions by Black women, supplanted by a more whitewashed narrative of events, that over time the public accepts as truth. As a result of the tactics used in this timeless Playbook entangling abuse and misogynoir, contributions by Black women who challenge the status quo, no matter how sound, brilliant, and timely — are often erased, the women themselves discredited and forgotten, and their voices deplatformed, such that no organized movement can build from their thoughts, actions, and contributions.

Dr. Timnit Gebru's firing at Google, when viewed in light of these tactics and their historical context within misogynoir, is not an isolated event nor an erratic incident of misunderstanding between Dr. Gebru and her former supervisors. It is a pattern that continues to unfold now that has a history, a context, and hopefully now, a name. What is novel is that we know about it as it's happening. What is novel is that Dr. Gebru is already respected and well-known in her field, as she should be. What is noteworthy is that it's happening in 2020 and 2021, where thousands of supporters can lend their support with a retweet or a signature to an online petition. But unfortunately, as Black women of diverse walks of life know — being dehumanized, humiliated, stripped of dignity, gaslit, silenced, manipulated, and abused at the hands of power is par for the course. If anything, Dr. Gebru joins a long lineage of Black women who, over the course of history, have dared to dream, create, sound the alarm, push for change; to be scientists, artists, creatives, engineers, women, and human — and have faced the wall of silence, pushback, threats, and danger. Black women have pushed and insisted on progress at a great cost — often their careers, their reputations, their dignities, their health, their legacies, and their lives.

If AI and Tech want to claim to care about ethics — we must recognize this pattern. We must own that the mechanisms within STEM and Tech used to silence, discredit, gaslight, and dismiss Black women are part of a historic pattern. We must grapple with the truth that Tech is not ahistoric, evolved, or "beyond" these issues. Rather, it is as much as part of them as any other field, and its treatment of Black women like Dr. Timnit Gebru is as much a part of a legacy of entrenched racism, anti-Blackness, and misogynoir. If AI and Tech want to claim a better, more ethical future — we must break out of this pattern and Playbook, and **stop abusing Black**

women.

The Playbook from History to Present

The tactics used by Google against Dr. Gebru have been used from the colonial era of the US to the present. These tools have been used to uphold the status quo, limit progress towards true equity, and keep marginalized groups like Black women "in their place" for centuries[2]. By examining notable examples of Black women over history, we can see that what happened to Dr. Gebru is part of a continuous thread, rather than an aberration, or an isolated interpersonal incident.

Taboo Contributions & the Master's Tools

The Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook starts with a **contribution**: a Black woman using her voice. Using the tools of societal currency and competency — be it data science and academic publications, or simply literacy and the written word — these unwanted **contributions** expose or reveal the truths of an unjust facet of society *(see step 1 in the diagram)*. The use of social currency in this way by Black women has historically incurred a backlash; this is due to the taboo Black women are crossing by using "the master's tools" in such a subversive way. Historically, Black women were supposed to do all the work without question, to observe and competently take note of all details, but say nothing.

Black women have long realized that oftentimes it is necessary to use the so-called "neutral" and "legitimate" power of the written word — whether by publishing books, speeches, or journal articles — to make uncomfortable truths known. This is rooted in systemic oppression as the power of literacy was systematically withheld from Black people for centuries. Black people using what Audre Lorde calls the ["master's tools"](#) to bring light to uncomfortable truths has always been fraught, especially for people who had enslaved and subjugated them (Lorde 1984). Historically, the dominant white class placed literacy, such as the ability to read, write and create, as gifts and privileges. While in rare exceptions, they sometimes taught and allowed Black people to use these skills, the implicit end of that bargain is that Black people should not "abuse" this "gift" by using it to upend a power structure that advantages whiteness. Words,

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[2] For more reading on the strategies that have been used to undermine the liberatory contributions of Black women, see the following: Lorde, Audre. Sister outsider: Essays and speeches. Crossing Press, 1984; Carruthers, Charlene. *Unapologetic: A Black, queer, and feminist mandate for radical movements*. Beacon Press, 2018. Morrison, Toni. *The source of self-regard: Selected essays, speeches, and meditations*. Vintage, 2020. Smith, Barbara. *The Combahee River collective statement: Black feminist organizing in the seventies and eighties*. Vol. 1. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986.

publications, literacy, data science, statistics, maps and more have long been treated with contempt when coming from Black voices. And while non-Black voices are often heralded as visionary, genius, or ahead of their time when writing and publishing uncomfortable truths — this has not been the case for Black people.

At Google, Dr. Gebru's team was known for groundbreaking research that challenged and brought light to the inequities and disparities that the software and AI industry sustained and often exacerbated. Through her and her team's dedicated work, they repeatedly described and quantified bias in AI systems as well as bias and exclusion inside of large corporations — and the paper that led to her firing was no exception. By working within the system, at Google itself, and using the currency of the scientific method, research, publications, and academic platforms to share this work, it enabled her work and the truths it uncovered to circulate to high-profile mainstream audiences who were not already inclined to see this truth. However, this currency of research also became a double-edged sword. By aiming for Dr. Gebru's team to retract their paper, Google attempted to silence this truth, and threaten Dr. Gebru's safety and security (*via* her job) as a bargaining chip. This is not new — Black women have dealt with this for centuries.

A historic example of particularly violent whitelash to controversial **contributions** by Black women is found in the life of Ida B. Wells. In 1893, Ida B. Wells[3] gave a controversial speech entitled "LYNCH LAW IN ALL ITS PHASES" at Tremont Temple Baptist Church, which still stands in Boston, only a few miles from where the authors work. This speech aimed to raise Northern awareness of lynching in the South, and to seek Northern support for antilynching policies. Wells was motivated to speak because she hoped that if her Northern audience understood the evils of lynching, they would take action, stating, "*I cannot believe that the apathy and indifference which so largely obtains regarding mob rule is other than the result of ignorance of the true situation.*" In the speech, Wells described her position, stating "*three years ago last June, I became editor and part owner of the Memphis Free Speech...I set out to make a race newspaper pay a thing which older and wiser heads said could not be done.*"

Wells saw her newspaper as a tool to support self-driven liberation among her Black community. In this role, Wells started to focus on lynching after the death of several of her friends. She noted in her speech that she did not expect lynchings in Memphis, however, "On the morning of March 9, the bodies of three of our best young men were found in an old field horribly shot to pieces." Wells had used her position in the Memphis Free Speech to advance knowledge on the fact that lynchings did indeed occur in the area and the authorities did not prosecute the deaths. Wells used the Memphis Free Speech to encourage Black residents to move to states further west, since the police were not protecting Black lives from mob violence.

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[3] Read more of Ida B. Wells analysis of the lynching of Black people in her book, Wells-Barnett, I. B. (1892). *Southern horrors: Lynch law in all its phases*. Good Press.

After publishing an antilynching editorial, she received numerous death threats, did not feel safe to stay in Memphis, and instead traveled to cities such as Boston to seek support for the antilynching movement. During her 1893 speech, Wells detailed her experience with death threats and harm that came to her due to reporting data and writing newspaper stories about the truth of the pervasive evil of lynching. She used tools such as data tables alongside her written articles to make her point, which has made her a hero to present-day data journalists and led to the founding of the [Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting](#).

The fact that Ida B. Wells was so empowered in her position at the newspaper, and that she used this position — one not normally afforded to Black people or to women — to advance and publish stories that upended the status quo of white supremacy and domestic racial terrorism — was intolerable. This was different than merely rumors or gossip of lynching; Wells had used the power of data science and the written word to reveal a depraved truth. For a nation decades away from even beginning to legalize racial equity, this **contribution** was not just unwanted, it was unbearable for those in power, and dangerous for Wells.

In a similar way, Dr. Gebru's team made a **contribution**, using her rightful position as the lead of Google's AI Ethics team, in order to advance knowledge of inequity in relation to large-scale language models. Perhaps, in a similar way — she and her team's **contribution** were years too early for an industry still so dominated by elite white men. But it does not change the fact that she paid for this **contribution** with her job and her security, and it does not change the fact that rather than working with her, her employers and many of her peers in Tech have employed the tactics of the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook in attempt to revise and reshape the narrative.

Disbelief and the Devaluing of Black Women's Creations

Dr. Gebru's team's findings in the pivotal work that led to her firing were significant: they held implications not just for Google as a company, but for the entire tech industry and for the fields of AI and natural language processing specifically. The paper outlined four risks of large-scale language models including ecological harms, lack of transparency, research opportunity costs, and potential for misuse**.** In response, Dr. Gebru's employers showed signs of **disbelief** *(see step 2 in the diagram)*: they argued that these **contributions** simply couldn't be true, and they attempted to undermine her credibility, academic honesty, and her psychological well-being in their remarks for her to retract the paper that came after the corporation had previously approved its publication. This **disbelief** that a Black woman could contribute to a field's discourse in such a groundbreaking way hearkens back to the life of Phillis Wheatley[4], the first

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4 Historical information about the life of Phillis Wheatly is drawn from the following: Poetry Foundation, "Phillis Wheatley," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley, Accessed January 2021; Kendi Ibram, Stamped from the Beginning, Nation Books 2016.

African American author of a published book of poetry in the 1770s, whose [statue](#) adorns the high-end Commonwealth Avenue park in Boston.
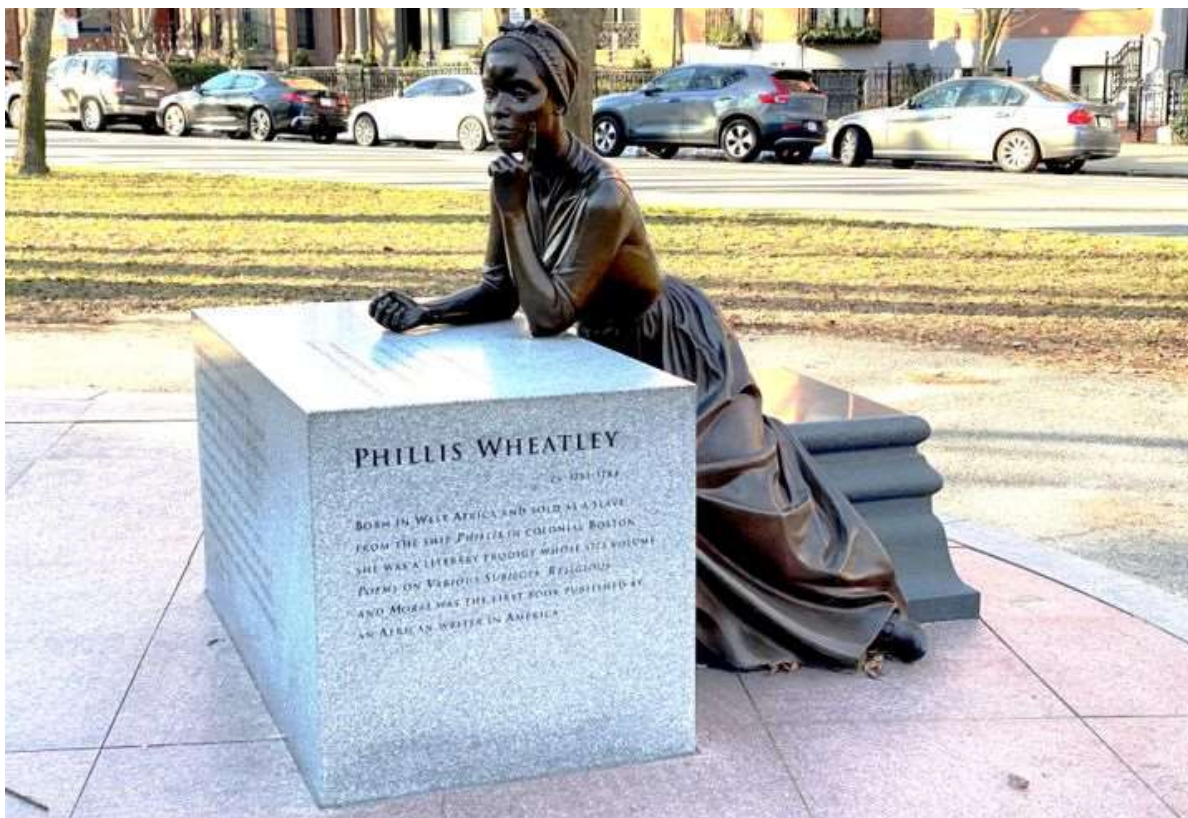
Statue of Phillis Wheatley on Commonwealth Avenue Park in Boston, Massachusetts
(Credit: Danielle Wood)

As a young girl, Phillis Wheatley was enslaved somewhere near modern-day Senegal and Republic of the Gambia and brought to Boston when she was around 7 to 9 years old. The family that enslaved her treated her as a servant but also provided her the opportunity to learn to read and write. Initially, even as young as 13, Phillis wrote individual poems that were shared at major events — such as elegies for a funeral — or were published in newspapers. Around the age of 18 (1772), Phillis had written enough poems for a book called *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,* and she sought "subscribers'' in Boston to support the publication cost. However, financial support was not enough for publication in the United States. The opening pages of the book *Poems on Various Subjects* reveals that her owner, John Wheatley expected that white colonists would not believe Phillis was the true author of the poems. John Wheatley arranged for a panel of distinguished Bostonian leaders — all male — to interview Phillis in order to confirm that she was the real author. Ultimately, the panel all agreed and signed a document confirming this. Their names are included in a preface to the book, including the Governor of Massachusetts and John Hancock, a well-known leader during the American

Revolution. Still, no publisher in the United States would take on the work.

Phillis Wheatley's status as an enslaved Black woman certainly contributed to the difficulties she faced — in publishing her work at all, in the public correctly attributing her authorship, and in earning fair compensation for the contributions she made. In part, the white power-holding class simply could not believe that Phillis could have created the poems because they were regarded as *good*. When it became clear that Wheatley was the author of the book of poems — the public attempted to devalue her and her work, deplatform her, and make invisible her legacy and groundbreaking contributions to literature as an enslaved African American woman. Phillis was later able to publish *Poems on Various Subjects* via a publisher in London. She received some amount of notoriety and income for her poetry during the lifetime of the Wheatley family. After their death, Phillis married a free Black man, and her later life was economically very difficult. Although she continued to publish poetry, she still faced difficulty in publishing her books in the United States. In 1779, she tried again to gain subscriber support to publish a book of poetry in the United States and found support lacking. Ironically, however, in the year of her death, 1784, she published an influential poem called *Liberty and Peace* celebrating the American Revolution, but she and her family were poor and debt-ridden. Phillis Wheatley died in a state of poverty and ill health while her second book of poetry was finally published two years later in the United States, but this was too late to provide her any financial relief.

Although centuries separate their stories, the wondrous **disbelief** and subsequent devaluing of Dr. Gebru and her work are steeped in vestiges of the same phenomenon that happened to Phillis Wheatley. Although legalized segregationist racism no longer exists in the United States today, the impacts of colonial attitudes and ideas about the inferiority and limitations of Black women leave a lasting and noticeable legacy that is active today. Even Dr. Gebru's non-Black colleagues and former coworkers remarked that the way Google treated her case was [different from that of other employee activists](#) — noting an inequity even amongst how the institution had treated those it had fired in the past. An insidious thread that connects the stories of Phillis Wheatley and Dr. Timnit Gebru is the thread of misogynoir — in this case, manifesting as **disbelief** that a person of this class could produce such an authoritative contribution.

Silencing the Truth and the Teller: Discrediting and Gaslighting

In cases when a Black woman's status-quo-upending contribution is believed — at least by the dominant class and stakeholders — but not welcomed, stakeholders have sent signals through the mechanisms of **discrediting** and **gaslighting** to silence the truths revealed, as well as their authors *(see steps 3b and 3c in the diagram)*. These mechanisms work well when a stakeholder aims to fight back against a narrative revealed by a particular contribution, because they serve

to make the author of the contribution seem irrational, crazy, isolated, and mistaken — rather than attacking the narrative itself. By using **discrediting** and **gaslighting** tactics, such as weaponizing pity and sympathy, as signers of the petition [accuse Jeff Dean of doing](#) in his initial responses to Dr. Gebru's firing, the public response to such backlash is managed. Rather than accept the truth that an institution may be perpetuating harm, which is difficult to swallow, we can accept one that says that an individual like Dr. Gebru is mistaken or unwell — and that is what led to this errant "contribution." The public is especially primed to accept the **gaslighting** and **discrediting** of people from marginalized groups — like Black women — who as noted, were historically expected to play a role of silent and accepting laborer, rather than activist or academe.

Discrediting and **gaslighting** have two subjects, though — the contributor in question, as well as the community and public at large. When the community and public accept this gaslight, it lures them into further complicity, and takes away their means or drive towards self-advocacy. Dr. Gebru's paper was controversial within Google because it outlined the risks of employing large-scale language models, models that Google has made strategic financial investments in. Allowing truth like this to be published does not bode well for those who'd prefer that the status quo – big data and big money, for some – not change. The way Dr. Gebru was fired, **discredited**, and **gaslit** in the response to her work, is part of this timeless pattern of Abuse and Misogynoir.

Another historic example of misogynoir and **gaslighting** can be found within the life of Harriet Jacobs (1861), author of the autobiographical "*[Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,](#)*" whose grave is located in [Mount Auburn Cemetery](#) close to the home of the authors. Jacobs experienced cruelty and danger in her life as an enslaved woman. She was consistently tormented emotionally and threatened when she did not succumb to her owner's sexual desires. Jacobs went into hiding for several years to avoid further mistreatment, which required her to confine herself to a crawl space in which she could not stand. After her escape to the North and freedom, Jacobs realized that Northerners were being **gaslit** by a narrative that slavery in the American South was not that bad. She wondered if the inaction and indifference to slavery by many Northerners was because they simply did not understand the reality of slavery, which often included abuse, assault, family separation, neglect, torture, and murder. Her autobiographical work discussed how the entire society was being **gaslit** in order to maintain slavery and white supremacy, and addresses particularly the indifference she observed among white women in the North. She describes slaves being told that runaways in the North lived in "deplorable conditions" in order to decrease desire to flee. Additionally, she discussed the reality of marital and sexual relations in the South in order to attempt to dissuade support for the Fugitive Slave Act. Jacobs described how men in the South took sexual gratification from whomever they wished — female slaves in particular — and how easily marriage vows were

cast aside. Furthermore, she detailed the evils that slavery did to families, for example, how separation of mothers and children were a common occurrence. Her book was seen as groundbreaking for its exposure of the ways that myths and narratives about slavery **gaslit** people on all sides into complicity.

Black women have often been **gaslit** as a way of **discrediting** not only their work, but taking away their means to advocate for themselves, and their greater communities. This has been effective at slowing progress towards justice and equity because society wants to believe that things just aren't that bad. Just as society wanted to believe that slavery flat out wasn't evil, it also wants to disregard the societal harms from practices pursued by Big Tech and AI. **Gaslighting** contributors like Dr. Gebru as well as the greater public, therefore, is in service of maintaining this status quo.

Dismissal, Erasure, and Revisionism

When Black women's contributions are **dismissed** and **discredited**, and the public is **gaslit**, as described above — a crucial next step concerns what to replace the contribution and subsequent scandal with. How can an individual or institution move forward from such revelations, and how can it ensure that unwanted contributions and contributors are no longer empowered to gather respect and clout? By practicing **erasure** and **revisionism**, the final steps in the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook *(see steps 4 & 5 in the diagram)*, perpetrators erase and silence the contributions and legacy of the contributors by supplanting their contribution with a new or revised narrative, which all but ensures that only their desired narratives will be remembered, and everything else forgotten.

Erasure aims to delete the original contribution, silence the contributor, and stigmatize her so that she does not gain a platform or respect elsewhere. In Dr. Gebru's case, she and others at Google were alarmed by how quickly those at the company aimed to [pivot its messaging](#), move forward, and erase the fact that Dr. Gebru had ever been the co-lead — not just a member, but a leader — of its Ethical AI program. **Revisionism** is a natural next step: by providing a new narrative of what happened, confused employees and the public at large are given an opportunity to move away from the discomfort and distress of grappling with injustice, and to move on with their lives.

A final example of the impact of **erasure** and **revisionism** can be shown by the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston (1942), a literary giant who grew up in Eatonville, Florida, in the first [incorporated Black municipality in the United States](#), just a few miles from where co-author Danielle Wood spent her childhood. Zora Neale Hurston was posthumously ['rediscovered'](#) by Alice Walker as a literary genius and is now lauded as a talented [anthropologist, playwright,](#)

folklorist, novelist and poet. One of her books, "Barracoon", was published in 2018, many years after her death in 1960 (Hurston 2018). Zora tells the story in her own letters and autobiography of the long journey to the publication of the book (Hurston 2006). She spent several years collecting interviews from a man named Kossola who had survived capture and enslavement. Zora describes in the book all the times she visited Kossola and her methods for interviewing him. She was not able to find a publisher after compiling the interviews into a manuscript. In the preface to the book, Deborah Plant, the editor of the newly published edition cites Zora's own letter to her sponsor stating that one publisher told her they would not publish the book unless Zora changed the quotes from Kossola from "dialect" to what they called "language" or the mainstream white form of English used more commonly in written publications. Zora refused to make that change. Although Hurston was able to publish multiple books during her lifetime, she died in poverty and was only recognized much later for her strong literary contributions.

The cost of **erasure** and **revisionism** is a loss of knowledge: by erasing the original contributor and her **contributions**, it ensures that knowledge is not passed down and shared intergenerationally. Additionally, it serves to cast doubt on the contributor in the event that she is "rediscovered" — as in the case of Hurston.

Erasure and **revisionism** can impact individuals, such as Dr. Gebru and Zora Neale Hurston, and they can also impact entire events and swaths of history. These mechanisms are why, for example, the US does not teach that Abraham Lincoln tried for years to buy out Southern slaveholders with compensated and phased emancipation in order to avoid a Civil War (Mullen and Darity 2020). Or similarly, why the story of the Tulsa race massacre — by historical accounts an organized domestic terrorist attack against well-resourced African Americans and their neighborhood — has only recently become well-known in the mainstream, despite being such a significant event (Johnson 2020). Erasure and revisionism have the insidious effect of making victims of injustice seem alone, deranged, or partisan in their struggles, rather than part of a centuries-long struggle for liberty and self-determination. These are themselves forms of **gaslighting**. **Erasure** and **revisionism** is why children in many states are taught that the Civil War is the War of Northern Aggression (Anderson 2013), and why some Americans believe today that unarmed Black individuals like Trayvon Martin or Breonna Taylor deserved to be murdered.

The ability to form a new narrative is powerful; especially when the truth reveals a systemic and metastatic rot.

Breaking Out of the Playbook

As should be clear by now, this cycle of abuse of Black women is not new. Dr. Gebru's story is not so much personal as it is *Playbook* – a classic example of how those in power cannot make space for truth bearers when the truth threatens the very basis of their power. The playbook is plucked right from history, as we have shown by the stories of Ida B. Wells, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and Zora Neale Hurston. The playbook continues to be wielded today: during her run for governor of Georgia Stacey Abrams had to face down multiple smear campaigns, including attempts to paint her as a gerrymanderer or as an extremist for burning a Confederate flag while in college (to which we say "good work, young Abrams"). These attempts at **discrediting** Abrams didn't work, and she was very close to winning, so her opponent resorted to **erasure** through overt, but legal, voter suppression.

And then there is the case of the Pulitzer prize-winning project *1619* by journalist Hannah Nikole Jones which centers American history around the development of slavery. Princeton historian Sean Wilentz wrote a public letter with other senior historians against the project. Their letter, ostensibly about "facts", but in fact about scholarly minutiae, uses the playbook tactics of **discrediting and dismissal** to undermine the work of *1619*. To his credit, New York Times executive editor Jake Silverstein roundly dismisses the dismissal, but doesn't actually identify what is happening in this letter. It is a public letter from prominent white historians about the work led by a Black woman and centering Black experience. It is evidence that elite white people in power cannot tolerate the idea that the world as they know it – professionally and personally, historically and presently – is riddled with white supremacy and that they themselves may in fact be the chief conduits. The thought is intolerable. Thus, they devolve to the Playbook.

In this sense, there is also nothing special about the domain of AI and tech, other than the fact that it is an industry exceptionally dominated by elite, white, Anglo, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender men from the Global North. This is a notably infinitesimal slice of the global population which possesses an outsized proportion of the world's wealth and power. As D'Ignazio & Klein describe in their book *Data Feminism*, tech and AI have a particularly acute *privilege hazard* problem (D'Ignazio & Klein 2020). What this means is that the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook gets pulled out sooner and more often and with more impunity than in other industries. We see this in Google's brazen firing of Dr. Gebru as well as their surprise at the angry and widespread reaction from their own employees and the broader AI community. More than 1100 Google employees and 4300 researchers signed a statement demanding accountability from Google. Recruiting firm HBCU 20x20 dropped Google as a client, stating "We cannot morally move forward with a company who will blatantly disregard the concerns of the people. Black people." Nine members of Congress wrote a letter to Google demanding

answers for the firing.

We see the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook in action in Amazon's 2019 campaign to **discredit** Joy Buolamwini and Deborah Raji's research into their Rekognition product used by law enforcement (Raji and Buolamwini 2019; Raji, Gebru, Mitchell, Buolamwini, Lee and Denton, 2020). In their audit of facial technologies described in the New York Times, Buolamwini and Raji demonstrated that Rekognition exhibits significant gender and racial bias. Amazon had a senior level executive respond with false assertions that Buolamwini and Raji had refused to share their training data (**discrediting**), confused facial analysis and facial recognition (**dismissal**) and thus their research was flawed (**devaluing**). Alvaro Bedoya, founding director of Georgetown's Center on Privacy & Technology called these tactics "trademark ignore/deny/attack." In response, Buolamwini had to Black-woman-splain back to Amazon in a first statement and then a second statement how error-ridden gender classification in face detection might spill over into error-ridden gender classification in face recognition and what the effects might be for Black people and women. Moreover, more than seventy artificial intelligence researchers, including a Turing Award winner, came forward to author a statement in support of Buolamwini and Raji's research.

There is a pattern here. When brilliant Black women expose misogynoir and speak truth to power, why does it take a great assembly of multi-racial professionals to defend their claims? Let us think of the many Black women who have been silenced for speaking their truths because they did not have access to accredited professionals, to white institutions, to the written word. We do not know their stories because they have been silenced by the Playbook. As Dr. Gebru tweeted in Dec 2020, "It's about a pattern that many people from specific backgrounds who do not have my platform, visibility or support experience in silence and have experienced at Google. So it's much bigger than the personal harm to me — which is why I noted that a lot of Black women are speaking up."

We call on the AI ethics community to take responsibility for rooting out white supremacy and sexism in our community, as well as to eradicate their downstream effects in data products. Without this baseline in place, all other calls for AI ethics ring hollow and smack of DEI-tokenism. This work begins by recognizing and interrupting the Playbook – along with the institutional apparatus – that works to **disbelieve**, **dismiss**, **gaslight**, **discredit**, **silence** and **erase** the leadership of Black women. This work continues by transforming our labs and institutions from cultures of white supremacy towards cultures of racial justice. This work is hard when we work in white-dominant institutions and yet it is still possible. As co-authors, we draw inspiration from the liberatory work and brilliance of many people who counter the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook, such as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Hannah Nikole Jones, Tressie McMillan Cottom, Cathy O'Neil, Safiya Noble, Ruha Benjamin, Mikki Kendall, Yeshimabeit Milner, Virginia

Eubanks, Meredith Broussard, and Tawana Petty. Within our MIT community, we are thankful to strive alongside colleagues such as Charlotte Braithewaite, Erica Caple James, Helen Elaine Lee, Dayna Cunningham & Colab, Taina McField, Ceasar McDowell, Ekene Ijeoma, D. Fox Harrell, Michel deGraff, Craig Steven Wilder, Melissa Nobles, Amah Edoh, Sasha Costanza-Chock, Delia Wendel, Karilyn Crockett, Devin Michelle Bunten, Eric Huntley, Sarah Williams, Mariana Arcaya, Dasjon Jordan, Géraud Bablon, Kevin Lee, the urban planning students who organized the "Black DUSP Thesis," Alexis Hope, Randi Williams, Joy Buolamwini and the Algorithmic Justice League, all the instructors and staff in Women and Gender Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies as well as the Consortium for Graduate Studies in Gender, Culture, Women, and Sexuality. We know there are many more colleagues working towards justice whom we do not know personally yet and we uplift your work here as well.

At our own research labs at MIT we do not hand-wring about the "pipeline" and wait for our chief diversity officers to deal with racism and sexism. We lead research labs that have made racial justice a central commitment. Within the Space Enabled Research Group at the MIT's Media Lab, Professor Wood and Dr. Turner pursue a mission to "Advance Justice in Earth's Complex Systems Using Designs Enabled by Space." Research projects within Space Enabled include activities to apply current space technology in support of societal needs — such as coastal resilience in Indonesia, Brazil and Benin — and efforts to design next-generation space systems. Dr. Turner and Prof. Wood also collaborate to develop theories and methods that technologists can use to infuse Intersectional Antiracism (Kendi 2019) into the inputs and outputs of complex sociotechnical systems (DeWeck 2011), such as nuclear and space (Wood 2019) infrastructure. Drawing from this research, Professor Wood teaches courses for undergraduates and graduate students to learn how to apply Critical Race Theory, Feminism (Taylor 2017) and Anticolonial Thinking (Wood 2020) in their work as engineers, designers, architects and artists. Professor D'Ignazio's Data + Feminism Lab at MIT designs technology with the explicit purpose of creating racial and gender equity in data-driven systems as well as physical spaces and places. In the project Data Against Feminicide, she and collaborators are building AI systems to support civil society efforts to monitor and challenge gender-based, racialized violence. The D+F Lab prioritizes the creation of a welcoming community for BIPOC, queer and women students, who have recently been working on auditing monuments, streets and place names for equity. D'Ignazio helped support the DUSP Racial Justice Teach-in last fall and is working together with faculty to integrate a racial justice lens into the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) spatial analysis class, a core requirement in the urban planning curriculum.

In the midst of Dr. Gebru's firing, a person tweeted to her that she'd be able get a job "just about anywhere" and to "put your resume in." Dr. Gebru pushed back. "For me this is not just about me getting a job but changing a toxic field that has been toxic to others like me for too

long." It has been far too long that the Abuse and Misogynoir Playbook has been used to silence Black women speaking truth to power. It's time to write a new playbook in AI Ethics built on respecting, acknowledging and supporting the liberatory work of Black women.

(from left to right)

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