



Stop Focusing on Black Students' Bodies, and Start Focusing on Their Academics

August 21, 2022 by Educator Barnes

Kayne West once said in a song, "Oh, girl, your silhouette make me wanna light a cigarette." Additionally, in their song "Brick House," the Commodores once sang, "How can she lose with the stuff she use? 36-24-36, ow, what a winning hand. 'Cause she's a brick house." When a man calls a woman a coke bottle or a brick house, he is saying she has a small waist with a big bust and hips. These songs above are about women, but a woman's shapeliness often

develops as a young girl. Genetics are beyond a Black girl's control. Many times, they used against her and puts her in uncomfortable situations. The school setting is not exempt.

The recent situation between Amandla Stenberg and Lena Wilson made me think of my past and how we treat Black bodies in school. I was first introduced to Amandla Stenberg in the movie "Hunger Games." Although I preferred the book to the movie, I liked Stenberg as an actress in the movie. I have followed Stenberg's work over the years. Stenberg, a non-binary gay person, who prefers they/them but is comfortable with she/her pronouns, is in the recently released horror movie "Bodies Bodies Bodies." Film critic Lena Wilson wrote a review saying the movie was "a 95-minute advertisement for cleavage." Stenberg sent Wilson a private message and said, "ur review was great, maybe if you had gotten ur eyes off my tits you could've watched the movie!" Wilson replied and said, "hey, amandla! generally a big fan of your work, but this sure is something. really wishing you well in your career and life. have a nice night."

Honestly, that is where the story should have ended. Instead, Wilson made a video that included the private exchange claiming she was "devasted" by Stenberg's message, claimed she "doesn't want anything else to come of this" (but posted a video to talk about it some more), and accused Stenberg of using their "social power" against her. In true social media fashion, Stenberg responded with their own video and expressed they are tired of people focusing on their chest. Stenberg ended the video with, "Lena, I thought your review was hilarious. I thought my DM was funny. I did not mean to harass you. I do not wish you any harm. You are allowed to have your criticism on my work, and I'm allowed to have my criticisms of your work. I wish you the best."

The truth is that whenever non-Black teachers are challenged about how they respond to Black bodies, they act like Wilson and feel attacked. No one has time for this victim act when the real victims are the Black students. I can relate to how those Black students feel.

In third grade, I started wearing a training bra. I'm not sure why those bras are called that or what they are training, but I'm pretty sure I was the only one with one in my 3rd grade class. The next year, in fourth grade, I had to wear a non-training bra and was a pretty full b cup. Throughout school, including college, my chest kept growing and getting bigger. The more it grew, the unhappier I became. Someone was always commenting on my chest and the rest of my body.

The church deacon told me my hips were “starting to fill out like your mom’s.” There were comments about my clothes being too tight and provocative. This included when I was going through my tomboy phase, wearing loose baggy boy clothes passed down from my male cousin. I was told at school, and outside of school, I couldn’t wear spaghetti straps because it made me “fast” and tempting to males. I was also told not to wear v-cut tops because my chest was too big to avoid having cleavage and looking “slutty.” In high school, I was once made to stand in front of Sunday school where the Sunday school superintendent explained how my dress was too short, and I wasn’t representing God’s kingdom appropriately. Also, it is important to note that a nickname I was given was chicken scratch because, as the person who labeled me with this horrible name said, “If a chicken scratched a line in the dirt, that’s how skinny Shawnta’s legs would be.” Up through the beginning of my sophomore year of college, I was under 100 pounds.

Many women in my family have had breast reductions. Since I was told as a young girl my chest was providing temptation, and I had evidence that my genetics meant they could keep getting bigger, I dreaded every time I had to get a bigger-sized bra. I was made to feel ashamed of my body, not because I was flaunting it but because other people had some inappropriate obsession with policing my body and not letting me be a young girl.

This summer, I spent time with a group of girls. One girl lamented about not being able to wear a crop top because her mom said it was inappropriate. She said, “It is just my belly. My belly is harming no one.” Being a shapely Black girl is scary to people, including teachers.

I can’t tell you how many times I have seen teachers dress code Black female students for jeans being too tight when the girl is wearing appropriately sized jeans that fit her body and are as close to her skin as the jeans on the white girls who have flatter posteriors and narrower hips. I have seen Black girls yelled at during school dances for being inappropriate when all they did was the two-step side to side. Because their body has some curves that move when they move, teachers say something. Instead, they ignore the white girl with her hands on her knees and shaking her butt.

This is not only about non-Black teachers; Black teachers also need to do better. They need to stop telling young Black girls they should essentially dress in a potato sack to hide their bodies. The Black body is beautiful. When young Black girls are criticized, they can grow into women who are uncomfortable in their bodies. I was one of those women. As my 39th birthday approaches and I reflect upon my 38th year of life, which was the first one without my dad, I am proud of the steps I have taken to eradicate that shame. One of those steps has

been wearing sleeveless outfits. I also was told that people like me shouldn't wear an article of revealing clothing like that. A few months ago, I wore my lime green strapless jumpsuit when attend a play my friend was in and felt beautiful.



No, we should not have known anything about this situation between Stenberg and Wilson. Since we do, let's use this as an opportunity to analyze the words we say to Black girls about their bodies, especially at school.