

William R. Glass and Agnieszka Graff

## **Race, Sexuality, and African American Women Representing the Nation: an Interview with Elsa Barkley-Brown**

**Elsa Barkley-Brown** holds a joint appointment in History and Women's Studies at the University of Maryland. She is also affiliate faculty with Afro-American Studies. Her research focuses on African American political culture with an emphasis on gender. She is co-editor of the two-volume *Major Problems in African American History* (2000) and *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1993) (winner of Leticia Woods Brown Memorial Publication and Edited Book Prize from the Association of Black Women Historians and the Anna Julia Cooper Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Black Women's Studies). Her publications include "Stephanie E. Pogue and the Artist's Veil," in *Arabesque* (2008); "Bodies of History," in *Telling Histories: Black Women in the Ivory Tower* (2008); "To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865-1880," in *African American Women and the Vote 1837-1965*, ed. A. Avakian et al. (1997); "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African-American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7 (fall 1994); "Imaging Lynching: African-American Women, Communities of Struggle, and Collective Memory," in *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas*, ed. Geneva Smitherman (1995); "Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond," *Journal of Urban History* (1995); "'What has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," in *Feminist Studies* (1992); "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History," in *Signs* (1989); and "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," in *Signs* (1989).

At the 2010 Polish Association of American Studies Conference in Łódź (*American Diversity: Identities, Narratives, Politics*) she gave a keynote lecture titled "Narratives of Identity and Citizenship: Reading the Black Female Body across the Twentieth Century." William Glass and Agnieszka Graff interviewed her on 27 October 2010 in Warsaw.

- ❑ **William Glass: You began your conference lecture discussing a Currier and Ives print of an African-American woman as the Statue of Liberty (reproduced on our cover). What is significant about this image?**

**Elsa Barkley Brown:** I began my lecture with this image because the whole question of who can represent a nation is a central question to thinking about citizenship and the process of incorporating different people into citizenship. This print from the late nineteenth century represents not just an idea of that time period, but, in some ways, a continuing idea of whether African-American women can be representative of the United States. Its message is to portray African American women as too grotesque and too primitive to be the representatives of the U.S.

- ❑ **WG: I would like you to compare this caricature to a more traditional image of the Statue of Liberty done by Currier and Ives (also reproduced on our cover) and comment on the positioning of the statues in both images.**

**EBB:** The African American statue is actually standing on the shores of New Jersey looking toward New York. The traditional Statue is classically draped as opposed to dressed in “mammy clothes.” But there is lots of debate about whether Frédéric Bartholdi used a black woman as a model in designing the Statue of Liberty. The National Park Service (NPS) has just gone through a seven-year investigation because it has been for so long told among African Americans; my students grew up learning that the Statue of Liberty was a black woman. The NPS report is interesting to read because they are clearly trying not to come down on one side or the other. They try to explain why people would think that. One question is whether Bartholdi was an abolitionist and actually intended this to be an abolitionist statement. Another question is whether at some point he had a black model for some of the work, and that seems to have been true. The conclusion of the NPS is that while we cannot see that he intended this particular piece to have anything to do with the abolition of slavery, we can see how some of these stories emerged. So it is not exactly an urban myth that the Statue is a black woman. What they are saying is that we have no evidence, we do not really know. Interestingly, the report was issued and withdrawn several times because different members of the committee did not like the wording of the final report. My point is that the whole question of whether the Statue of Liberty is a black woman remains very important to a lot of young African American people who understand her blackness would be a symbol of inclusion and who believe not acknowledging her as black is indicative of the inability to imagine the black woman representing the nation.

If we are comparing the two images, certainly the dress would be one, the classical dress versus the working class attire, the apron, ...

❑ **WG: which is an American flag.**

❑ **Agnieszka Graff: Isn't there a famous image from the 1940s of a black woman with a broom and a mop, with an American flag as a background?**

**EBB:** Yes Gordon Parks's *American Gothic*. In the Currier and Ives print of the black woman statue, there is the torch in her hand. This is actually supposed to represent a kind of violence to the nation: the torch here is not a light or a beacon; it is smaller as if she were going to use it to torch a house. The primitiveness of the woman represented in this print reinforces the idea that African Americans cannot be modern, and since democracy requires a modern citizen African Americans cannot be citizens.

❑ **AG: And also that they need to be controlled. I was struck by the theme of control in your lecture, the way you link it to the assumption of supposed excess of black women's bodies. The fat mammies, the large lips, protruding behinds, too much hair. American culture is obsessed with self-control and self-containment so this would be an important opposition: the neatly compact white woman's body and the black female body that grows too big, flows shamelessly out of control. This is misogynistic imagery but also clearly racist.**

**EBB:** I think the whole idea of bodily excess and how one controls that, whether it is through putting the body to work or in other ways has been a central theme for African American history, imagining how the body has to be disciplined.

❑ **AG: You discussed in your lecture the way the current First Lady, a black woman who is visibly bodied, is being constantly taken to task for having a body. Not only her fashion choices are endlessly debated, but also the actual shape of her body, in particular her buttocks. It is hard to imagine any previous First Lady being discussed in such intrusive ways. And yet Michelle Obama does represent the United States; she is not being excluded from being the First Lady. So America has gone quite a ways from since the racist image of a black woman as Statue of Liberty was produced.**

**EBB:** Certainly, there has been a significant amount of change. But I think there is an underlying current of thinking of what the U.S. is, and who is and can

be its best representative, that makes it very difficult for African American women to be in that position. Part of the issue with Michelle Obama is what people see in her actual physical features and whether or not they are appropriate or representative. The focus on the First Lady's derriere, for example—for more than a century black women have been caricatured with humongous backsides which supposedly were visual evidence of primitivism, savagery, and licentiousness. Recognizing this, many black women have celebrated the many fashion photographs that emphasize Obama's buttocks as a move away from stereotype. While, at the same time, many white commentators have wished she would dress in ways that made her look slimmer, that were not fitted to the hips and backsides, apparently finding it unseemly that a First Lady would have her figure and, especially, would have this figure and not try to camouflage it.

Another example I mentioned was from the 1980s: the media portrayal of Olympic figure skater Debi Thomas. Even though she represented the United States, sports commentators and previous champions had difficulty accepting her as the national representative, and it was all figured in her body, whether her body could be a representative. Commentators, emphasizing her hips and buttocks framed Thomas' body as "athletic" and framed that against the white America and European bodies they considered "artistic," stated outright that a body like Thomas' could never be pretty enough to be champion. So I think you can see this continuing question of which bodies can appropriately represent the nation figured in the discussions of Michelle Obama, discussions that are partly about her body, but also about her history. That question of whether an African American can represent is not limited to the woman. One of the key themes of the public conversation around Barack Obama is his racial and national identity: whether he is African American. Some commentators have argued that one of the reasons that it is possible for him to be President is that he is biracial, that makes him to some people less representative and to others more representative.

- **AG: Yes, but you showed in your lecture that the gender component of this issue of representation is also very significant. Theoretical studies of gender and nation suggest that women's relation with the nation is different than men's; it is metaphorical while men's is metonymic. Women get to represent the nation as a unity—woman is visible in nationalism as allegory, symbol, sign. Statue of Liberty, Britannia, Polonia, Marianne are among the best known examples here. Men, by contrast, are imagined as parts of the nation, members of the collectivity. So I guess when you work race and racism into the equation, the question is this: are women of the "other race" excluded in a more significant or violent way than men? Caricatured and maligned or simply ignored? If you take the way that black masculinity was represented through the**

**image of the black brute or the image of Zip Coon, there is grotesqueness there too. So I wonder whether the exclusion of black women has been more grotesque or perhaps differently grotesque. Is there a different sort of contempt in racial caricatures of Mammy or Jezebel?**

**EBB:** I would not say it is more; it is different because all of the notions of grotesqueness, savagery, and primitiveness come down to women. The general assumption has usually been that men have been made into what they are by women. The idea that men are as moral as women require or train them to be adds a different sort of component to thinking about women. For example the early twentieth century constructions of black men as brutes and rapists were embedded in the construction of African American women as immoral, and their immorality is what produced brutish black men. So it is not that characterizations of black women are more grotesque than those of black men, but that even the grotesque characterizations of black men are seen as produced by that of the women.

**□ WG: In your lecture you commented mostly on Mammy, the long history of desexualized images of black women, but another image in popular culture is Jezebel, the highly sexual seductress. What do these conflicting images of black women suggest about the role of popular culture in representing the nation?**

**EBB:** These have been two continuously oppositional ideas of African American women, with Mammy being the most comfortable one for people from many different ideological perspectives. If we go back to slavery, it is really interesting that the Mammy is an image produced as part of a pro-slavery argument and one that is produced as a part of an anti-slavery argument. It can serve both those ideological functions comfortably. And through most of the twentieth century, well into the 1950s and 1960s, in popular culture, film images, magazines, etc., the image of the Mammy was of this comforting, desexualized black presence, conveying the message that this woman is primarily concerned about the well being and protection of white families.

**□ AG: And not so kind to her own children, if she has any. An important part of the Mammy mythology is the assumption that she has no private life of her own, and if she has one it is brutal and neglectful. The fantasy that she would beat her own children and love the white children is really a fantasy attributing racism to the Mammy. She is portrayed as a good caregiver and a bad mother, because black children are viewed as not worthy of love to begin with.**

**EBB:** That is an image that a number of African American women artists have thought about and challenged. Joyce Scott is an important artist who has produced a series called “Mammy Now, Nigger Later,” and part of the series is about her relationship to her mother who, in Scott’s youth, was employed as a domestic worker taking care of other children. Scott’s series considers the impact on their relationship. But she makes an effort to think about that idea of bad mother to her own children as a status that is produced by the job, and not by her mother’s actual feelings toward her. She tries to separate what is actually her mother’s relationship to her from how her mother has to represent their relationship. The alternative in popular culture to this loving, caring, peaceful Mammy is the hypersexualized Jezebel. Both of those images come out of slavery, helping to justify both the institution of slavery and the lack of citizenship rights.

- ❑ **AG: But is it not also true that both Mammy and Jezebel serve as complementary justifications for the abuse of black women by white men? Mammy is asexual therefore the white lady need not fear her as a rival; the black woman in her house is not viewed as threat. And Jezebel is placed outside the house and is asking for it. So the fact that black women are being raped is being made both invisible and excused.**

**EBB:** The notion that black women cannot be raped goes back to their alleged immorality and indiscriminate sexual behavior. The idea that black women always desire sex, that they lure men into it. If black women always desire sex, their rape is an impossibility. This alleged insatiability presumably produces black men who have no control of their own sexual desires because none was needed with black women and who, therefore are rapists.

- ❑ **AG: In a fascinating essay “What Has Happened Here,” first published in 1992, you used these ideas in an analysis of the Anita Hill story. You look at how Clarence Thomas was so easily able to convince people that making him accountable for what he did to a black woman was “a high-tech lynching.” The fact of the abuse of black women was invisible from the start and it was almost impossible to make it visible. Would you say it is a given in American culture that that is what happens? A kind of unexamined assumption?**

**EBB:** It is not so much a given. A number of women historians have argued that from the early twentieth century African American women learned to try to hide evidence of sexuality as a form of protection. But that act also means hiding evidence of sexual abuse. Therefore that drops out of African American political culture and conversations in the belief that that would be a protective

strategy. Rather than protection, it eventually creates a whole series of silences. So in the case of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas it made it hard to bring that back into public conversation without many people feeling that you violated some unstated understanding.

- ❑ **AG: I would like to quote a black woman's statement from your essay that illustrates this well: "Hill's friend Ellen Wells, herself a victim of sexual harassment on the job, explained much in a succinct statement before the committee: 'You don't walk around carrying your burdens so that everyone can see them. You are supposed to carry that burden and make the best of it.'" So what you are saying is that it is not just the black men's sexism or the outside culture's racism that creates the pressure; black women themselves have a stake in hiding the truth, evading the whole question of sexual vulnerability, body image, etc. If this is so, then the images of Michelle Obama would be a breakthrough. She is so blissfully demonstrative, so visibly at ease with her body, so provocative with clothes. She doesn't seem to mind "excess," and the media revel in it, but don't seem to blame her for it.**

**EBB:** Oh yes, I think it is a breakthrough. My lecture was about Michelle Obama's playfulness with clothes, playfulness with her body, playing in public with a body that is of a type that has often been represented in public only in caricature. And I think, and this is not something scientific, that many black women see and respond to that, if you read the responses to news articles and blogs and things like that. Many black women, seeing another black woman not trying to remake her body into some other body, not trying to hide what that body is, and being so visible and playful with her body, see this as a real breakthrough and change.

- ❑ **AG: She is doing all that and doing it in a way that is dignified.**

**EBB:** Yes, exactly.

- ❑ **WG: In the 1950s and 1960s there was a series of advertisements promoting products to help women gain weight, some used images of white women but some were clearly intended to market these products to black women. What is interesting is that these ads were promoting "weight on," just the opposite of today's ideals.**
- ❑ **AG: But what you said in your lecture about black women putting on weight was much more sinister, namely you said that actresses playing**

**black roles in the 1930s and 1940s, when they finally started getting these roles, were required to put on weight. Your example was Louise Beavers playing the massive and nurturant Delilah in the 1937 version of *Imitation of Life*.**

**EBB:** Yes, she had to put on weight to reproduce that Mammy image, the physical notions of what people see as the Mammy image.

- ❑ **AG: I do not want to undermine your optimism about Michelle Obama, and what her success means about race relations in the States, but I wonder if it is not really at least partly about class privilege. She is up there at the highest position imaginable for a woman, therefore she can play up her sexuality and maintain her dignity. That game is open to her, but it is not open to a young black woman living in the ghetto, and I suspect it would be risky game to play for a middle class young black woman trying to make it in the white world. A black secretary on Wall Street, wearing revealing clothes such as those you showed us Michelle Obama wearing, might be considered a slut and not a career woman who happens to be playing up her sexuality.**

**EBB:** I do not want to be over-optimistic; I want to be clear that I am not saying that Michelle Obama changes things for other black women. But I do think her presence on the national stage begins to make possible a different vision of the nation. Theoretically, we can think of it as helping us think about all of the kinds of things that are necessary for an inclusive, full citizenship. Fashion and playing with the body are not generally parts of the conversation on this issue. But being able to step into public without having to police one's body or having it policed by others is centrally important. One of the things I said in the lecture was about the policing of hairstyles of girls in schools, making cornrows and braids actually illegal; you cannot wear those styles to some schools because they are assumed to be related to gangs. Here are black girls not being allowed to play with their body.

- ❑ **AG: So a hairstyle that is associated with black culture is marked as criminal.**

**EBB:** There is a long history of that. In the late nineteenth century, braiding your hair was marked as lazy. I have never understood that, given the amount of time that it takes. But white missionaries coming to the South after the Civil War marked braided hair on black women as a sign of laziness. Currently, braids and cornrows are seen as criminal. Moreover, it is true in businesses. Three or four

years ago an editor of *Glamour* gave a talk on how to break into business in which they made it very clear that wearing cornrows or braids would not be acceptable. So it is certainly true that there are a lot of things that Michelle Obama is able to do as First Lady, ways she is able to dress, that you probably would not do if you were trying to get a job or keep a job on Wall Street or someplace like that. But it is also true that you need initial kinds of breakthroughs and changes, and I think she quite consciously does that with her fashion and playing with her body.

- WG: There was another breakthrough about the same time as Debi Thomas, that I think is also instructive, and that is Vanessa Williams. She was very clearly called Miss America, and yet she received death threats and was eventually forced to resign as Miss America because of certain photos she had taken that were deemed inappropriate.**

**EBB:** I think all those are important breakthroughs. I think what a number of black women find significant about Michelle Obama is basically different from the example of Vanessa Williams, in that Williams represented a particular beauty standard that was not necessarily all that different from previous Miss Americas. She was indeed black, but with a particular kind of hair and eyes. I am not necessarily agreeing with that, but I think that is how a lot of people think about it.

- AG: So hers was a race-neutral kind of beauty, a kind of blackness that somehow evades racism?**

**EBB:** Not race-neutral. She can be incorporated because she does not change the standard and was seen as meeting that standard, whereas Michelle Obama is seen by body type and hair as representing a different standard of beauty. I think it would be very hard to image a much darker black woman having been first lady.

- WG: Or a much darker woman being the first black Miss America.**

- AG: One of our colleagues here at the American Studies Center, Krystyna Mazur, writes about and teaches courses on African American films. She could not be here today but wanted us to ask you this question: We know more or less what conditions shape representations of women: objectified, sexualized, infantilized, and fragmented. What are some of the contemporary differences between the appropriations of black and white women's bodies? Are black women hurt by sexism in a different way than white women?**

**EBB:** If we are talking about popular culture, the appropriations of black women's bodies are always done in ways that point to ideas of savagery and animalism, and I think that is actually very different from the appropriations of white women's bodies. I don't think that either is better or worse in that sense.

**AG: The pornographic images of white women's bodies are more child-like, vulnerable, victimized, they are objectified but not animalistic, right?**

**EBB:** Yes, it is always moving towards an assumption of a particular kind of pedestal ideal that white women should be on, which is also extremely confining.

**AG: In other words, a white slut departs from the white virgin...**

**EBB:** ...whereas a black slut could never attain that ideal. The idea is that the ideal and maybe even the normal white woman is or ought to be a virgin, but the whole notion of a black virgin would be seen as so abnormal. So I think those are really very different. In recent film and art there are a lot of really exciting black women artists who are challenging those ideas, who are working through the body and thinking about the body, putting it on display. At the beginning of my lecture I juxtaposed that black woman Statue of Liberty caricature with the work of Renée Cox as one such artist. Carla Williams is another example: in her photography she works with her own body and she also writes about black women trying to hide their sexuality, how they see their bodies and how a sense of being ashamed about their bodies emerges. For example, she says that if you go into physical education class after it is over, you see that black women will try to hide their bodies as they go to the showers but white women do not. She and Renée Cox do a lot with their own bodies. Kara Walker is another artist who has tried to address this issue in a different and much more controversial way by taking on stereotypes. She argues that black women run from stereotypes and try too hard not to be that stereotype. Her point is that if you own the stereotype and take it to its furthest extreme and imagine that it is real it can no longer hurt you. That is not her work now, but her original work reproduced the beautifully romantic images of slavery that were also very sexually violent.

**AG: Isn't there also some role reversal, with black people in the role of aristocrats?**

**EBB:** There is some of that, but a lot of her art is about all kinds of sexual penetration, all kinds of imaging of the utmost violence, and then romanticizing

it and making it beautiful. Then asking what could hurt you now if you actually accepted that, how could that not possibly have been a part of slavery? So in a lot of different ways, African American women artists created the first frontier of taking on these issues and thinking about black women's bodies and sexuality and so open up those kinds of conversations.

- ❑ **AG: Krystyna was also wondering if you are familiar with the film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996); she argues convincingly that it is a black version of female camp, and in that way it is a strategy to deal with those grotesque racist images we have been discussing. There is a scene where Cheryl Dunye, the film-maker, confesses her fascination with the Mammy figure, and there is a re-enactment of a scene with a mammy. Do you think it is an intervention that is useful and that can blow up these stereotypes?**

**EBB:** I think it is a great film in a lot of different ways. One of the things I think Dunye does with the fascination with the Mammy is to change who the Mammy is and so she makes very clear that the film image of the Mammy and the actual actress and person are two different things. She also tries to get us to reread even the film image of the Mammy. There's a great film by Tracey Moffat, an Australian film-maker, a very short film called *Lip* (1999), which takes clips of different Mammy images in films and puts them together to show you how these actresses, in their performances, are really creating something different, that they are not the sort of Mammy image in their performance of them. And I think Cheryl Dunye is doing something similar.

- ❑ **AG: But she is also sexualizing the Mammy.**

**EBB:** Definitely making the Mammy sexual. Then the whole film itself, you watch it thinking this is a documentary and then end up with realizing none of it is true, so in that way questions the things that we have understood as true and built those histories on.

- ❑ **AG: Does that reflect your concern as a historian of black women for the way in which that history should be written? You have suggested the metaphors of gumbo and quilting...**

**EBB:** Yes, it is about the suppositions on which we build black history, and a lot of that is related to sex and sexuality. A really nice piece by Mattie Udora Richardson in the *Journal of Women's History* thinks about the silences in black women's history, the silences that are sexual. Exploring those silences offers

opportunities for new insights. For example, we have always talked about the black women's club movement as one of the places where this notion of protected sexuality developed, but Richardson argues that we can see that as a place where women came together and created romantic liaisons that might actually be the space of sexuality as well as the space for protecting.

□ **AG: I am about to open a can of worms—I'd like to ask you about relations between black and white women in the States, feminist scholars in particular. What is your reading of the endless, guilt-ridden and angry conflict? I am primarily concerned about academic scenarios, the debate about the exclusion of black women from white feminism which was subsequently redefined as really a question of forgetting that black feminists were there from the beginning. It seems that you were one of the people who asked these questions in an uncomfortable way in the 1980s by saying that it is not enough to "include." You have to look at the interdependencies. It appears to me that this work is now being done, at last. I come out of literature so my examples are literary. There is a novel that was a bestseller last year, *The Help* by a white woman from the South, Catherine Stockett. A subtle, complex, empathetic, and beautiful novel in which a white woman takes on that question of the interdependence of black and white women's lives, looks at the Mammy figure through her own life as a white girl who was raised by a black nanny in a deeply racist society. Do you agree that the time of the impossibility of having a conversation is over? Are black and white women talking to each other in interesting ways?**

**EBB:** This is complicated. The 2009 election in the National Organization for Women raises this issue, but whether this was an election about race or about generations is unclear at this moment. The contest was between a young black woman, Latifa Lyles, and an older white woman, Terry O'Neill. The former was imagined as a part of the third wave of feminism, while the latter was imagined as a part of the second wave. For some people it felt like the election was about race, and for others it felt like an attempt to push out the older generation. Additionally, there was the concern whether this older generation of second wave white women would recognize the importance of electing this young black woman. But it is really not clear what the dynamics of this election won by O'Neill were, because generational conflict was such an important part of what was going on.

But in terms of academics, the issues that were being raised by many black women academics was recognition: one part of it was the demand that histories of the feminist movement should recognize black feminists, the question of

where they appear in those histories, and another concern was that the white women doing the writing should recognize black women scholars. Those are different but related. I certainly think that a lot of black women scholars feel that their work and they themselves as scholars are often overlooked and ignored. Also, there is an assumption that white women who work on topics related to African Americans have to work harder than black women, as if somehow by osmosis black women know about these topics and it is only by hard work that white women can do it. My point is that there was a whole mix of things, some of which have to do with professional relationships.

**□ AG: Like who is invited to appear on panels at conferences ...**

**EEB:** ....and the politics of citation, and so then whatever histories you are writing to include the activities of black women. There is some really interesting work that is being done. For example, Sherie Randolph is doing a piece that looks at the way in which the Black Power movement and the feminist movement were coming together, not actually imagining themselves as the same movement but talking to each other. Specifically the way Flo Kennedy was bringing T. Grace Atkins to Black Power meetings, not for the notion of those actually merging but for the notion that they could learn from each other and walk side by side with each other. So Randolph is making an argument that there was a lot more cross-fertilization than has been recognized, and that merging is not the only way to imagine this history but to think about what people were learning from each other as a way of including both in the history you are writing.

**□ AG: Do you think that the theoretical framework of intersectionality, now almost twenty years old, was a significant breakthrough? Has it caused people to start doing more than just token inclusion—oh let's have a chapter on black women, let's have a text by a black woman in our anthology? Has this has changed since Kimberlé Crenshaw's intervention in the early nineties?**

**EEB:** I think that it helped people, but it is not the place to stop. It helped people to imagine a way to talk about two or more types of oppression and inequality because it was certainly the case that people had a hard time dealing with race and gender and class and sexuality. Don't I have to do one? So the notion that you had to see how all of these influenced each other and think about them in a complex and dynamic way was very important at that time. It is now at a point where it is hard to know what that means because people have argued in so many different ways about how you create a methodology that does not privilege one oppression over another. Nonetheless, it was an amazing

breakthrough in getting people to understand the point and to think: yes I can work with this new framework.

- ❑ **AG: Would you say that the shift towards intersectionality had something to do with the Anita Hill hearings, and all the articles and books that came out of that experience?**

**EBB:** One of the things that the Anita Hill hearings did is to get people to think about how the constructions of that experience were really different depending on where you were positioned, whether you were black male, or white male, black middle class woman, black working class woman. This was something that people could see.

- ❑ **AG: Perspective is one thing, but a dynamics of projection were also at work: many white women were claiming Anita Hill as one of themselves, ignoring her racial identity. And black men were talking about her as if she were just black and owed her allegiance to her race, ignoring the gendered aspect of what happened to her. The demons of the race/gender dynamic were all suddenly in plain view, and many of the articles written at the time—including yours—captured the revelatory power of that moment.**

**EBB:** Yes, there are some of those moments that crystallize the issues or you can use those moments in kinds of ways that really help you see.

- ❑ **AG: To return to some of the ways black artists have countered or unravel racist stereotypes, have you thought about Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* and the debate around that movie? I have seen it a number of times and have very mixed feelings about it. He tried to take the blackface stereotypes, including the Mammy stereotype, and throw them back at mainstream culture in this incredibly angry way. But it can also be argued that he also attributes more power to them than they really have, thus bolstering racism, rather than fighting it. This takes us to questions of symbolic violence and to the broader question of the return of blackface to American popular culture. This seems to be a topic that is getting a lot of attention from some of the most brilliant scholars in American studies—Eric Lott, Susan Gubar, Michael Rogin to name just a few. Blackface minstrelsy is also having a comeback with entertainers (for example, a blackface moment in *Mad Men*, or an entire blackface episode in Sarah Silverman's comedy series). This is something that has been a taboo for a good fifty years and now white bodies painted black are coming back.**

- ❑ **WG: As in the popular comedy *Tropic Thunder*, starring Ben Stiller. It is a movie about making a Vietnam War movie in which Robert Downey Jr. plays an actor playing an African American soldier, and part of the actor's method for getting into character is to stay in character even when the cameras are not rolling. So he darkened his skin and continued to use African American slang and accent during the down time between takes on the set. The interesting thing about this construction is that the film-makers displace the sense of transgression because Downey's character is not an American but an Australian who is appropriating blackface. So yes, it is blackface, but the comedy is not derived from humiliating an African American soldier but that is really stupid for this Australian actor to be trying to be the character all the time and talk jive. So what do you make of this?**

**EBB:** I have no idea what to make of that. There are several African American artists who are producing images that many see as going back to minstrelsy ideas, and of course those artists would argue that they are not reviving these images but rather interrogating them. I am probably extremely conservative about this because, while I understand what those artists are doing, in the larger popular culture, I am not sure that reproducing black face is not reproducing many of the same kinds of ideas that it originally had. I think you would have to assume that American society has moved to some post-racial place that I do not imagine that it has moved to, in order to expect large popular audiences see the parody. So I am just not sure. There are lots of people who do think that America has moved to this post-racial place in which those would be safe and funny things to do, but I do not actually think that is true of the U.S. politically.

- ❑ **AG: But at the same time you have the resurgence of funny, ironic blackface, you have symbols of lynching appearing on campuses. They were not ironic; the 2006 Jena scandal was about hatred, an outrageous act of symbolic violence.**

**EBB:** During the 2008 presidential election, a lot of the anti-Obama images and rhetoric were ones that tried to draw on older stereotypes.

- ❑ **WG: But it is an incredible variety of stereotypes, not just the minstrelsy ones but also those of the black militants.**

**EBB:** Muslim, too. If anything, I think that in the campaign and now in the Tea Party's response to Obama, if ever you needed evidence that this is not a post-racial society you definitely have it. So then I think it is necessary to ask

what is the body of thought into which these popular images are falling. If you reproduce blackface on *Mad Men*, which is a television show that is definitely designed to be about a specific, earlier time period, then we can think that's what they would have done in that era. But it is not clear to me what this means to viewers: does having one of the main most loveable characters in the series sing a whole song in blackface suggest to people that this is acceptable now. It is not clear to me that people who watch *Mad Men* are thinking "oh so that's about the 1960s."

- ❑ **WG: This again is anecdotal about the state of race relations in American society, but when I was teaching in Mississippi I had classes with black and white students discussing race and the white students would claim that they were not racist and I could see my black students rolling their eyes as if to say "you really don't understand."**

**EBB:** Well, in the lull after Obama's election in some of the voting rights cases that were coming through the courts, one of the arguments that they started making in Texas was this: Obama has been elected so all of these voting rights cases can be wiped off the books because his election means that the electoral process in the U.S. is free and fair. This argument both assumed his election as having produced a post-racial era and that even what is happening at any local political level has now been subsumed into this post-racial era. So it is not just in popular culture that this idea of the post-racial emerges, the post-racial idea gets applied in ways, like the Texas court case, that assume the structures of American politics and economics have changed for African Americans in general by virtue of the election of one person to office. This thinking is pretty dangerous.

- ❑ **AG: Another version of this narrative is *The Blind Side*, a recent movie about a white woman who adopts a black teenager. In general, the whole trend in American popular culture is to put black people and white people as individuals as best friends, doing great favors for each other and thus in a sense resolving the history of slavery and segregation. This idea that interracial friendship can erase history is idiotic but it works in popular culture, because it makes for a nice tearjerker.**

**EBB:** There is always in the discussion about race relations [the question] about whether we are talking about personal relations or social structures and that tendency to conflate the two becomes problematic.

**□ AG: But in a sense that is what popular culture does to all social issues, doesn't it? It says if you try hard enough, if you love the representative of the other group, it will all be fine. But with race, starting with the movie you discussed in your lecture, *Imitation of Life*, there is this particularly insidious way of pretending that the problem does not exist by throwing at audiences the story of an individual friendship. And in a way *Precious* does that too. It is a very radical film in a lot of ways, but it has that white teacher/black woman relationship that is regenerative and redemptive.**

**EBB:** I think that was a lot of the criticism of the film.

**□ AG: But it is also a thoughtful, progressive film that deals with some of the most painful issues we have been discussing: sexual violence, the abuse of black women, in this case a black woman abused by her black father, the violence connected to food, the school system's neglect of black people's education. It is a very cruel and dangerous movie in a lot of ways. What was your response to the film? Did you take part in the debate about it?**

**EBB:** My graduate students have taught the book—Sapphire's *Push*—for a long time, so I know the book better than the film. Also I have worked with an artist Rhodessa Jones who does a lot of work in prisons. When we worked in a girls' juvenile detention center it was one of the books she had us use.

**□ AG: Is the book considered less problematic than the film?**

**EBB:** I do not know that. I think that once something is a film and in theaters everywhere it has a different resonance than a novel which people generally are not necessarily thinking about. Many Americans will have read the novel, but making it a film puts things in an entirely different conversation. I also think that in literature there is a wider range of African-American characters than in film, and so some of the responses to the film are really about what else is out there, what other films about African Americans and African American women have there been this year that *Precious* is competing with. That is how I read black responses to the film. I think Sapphire in writing *Push* definitely was trying to create a conversation about things about which there were silences. She wanted to enter the conversation we have been having about the parts of African American women's lives that cannot be talked about in public because of the danger that talking about them in public reinforces stereotypes and will work to the disadvantage of black women. She was definitely trying to create a conversation

about abuse, about silences around abuse, about obesity and silences around that, in a format that is very accessible. It was a novel that was really well received, so I think the reception of the film is somewhat different. It could be that black women read the novel as a novel for them, one which principally would be read by them, and I think you can read the film as not a film for black Americans but for the mainstream Hollywood movie audience.

❑ **AG: Is this analogous to the 1980s debate about *The Color Purple*? The film was a breakthrough in American culture in terms of the visibility of black women, but of course this film was made by Steven Spielberg.**

**EBB:** Perhaps the place that I would see it as the same is that while there were certainly a lot of African American men raising questions about the image of black men in *The Color Purple*, with *Precious* there is a conversation about making public what some perceive as negative images which is not just focused on the images of men. I think the fact that the person making *Precious* was an African American man, Lee Daniels, changed the conversation somewhat from that over *The Color Purple*.

❑ **AG: But it seems to me to be a question of black women's loyalty to the black community—what this woman you quote calls “carrying your burden”—in order not to shed bad light on the community. I think this is an ongoing struggle that contributes to why black women's feminism has been swept under the carpet by the white women's movement, and later belittled by some historians as not part of the main narrative.**

**EBB:** I think there has to be a difference when the conversation is about black women's loyalty to the black community that has to do with hiding abuse by men and thinking about the characterization of black men. I do not think much of the conversation in *Precious* was about characterizations of men, although that is fundamental to what the film is about. The conversations in *Precious* are really about the mother and the daughter, so I am not sure it is the same conversation as *The Color Purple*. I think the issues at stake in *Precious* were more about African-American women talking about their own representation.

❑ **AG: One last question—about identity and academic interests. What do you make of Eastern Europeans, and more generally of white people, working on African American history and culture? This is a conversation that we have been having behind closed doors. A number of my friends, young, mostly female, Polish Americanists, go to the States to do research, on black culture, and often feel uncomfortable. As if they**

**were being blamed for their race, for studying a topic that is not really theirs. Is there a residual identity politics in the field of African American Studies? Is there really a sense out there that we should feel uneasy about our whiteness? Or is this a trans-national field where the scholars' race does not matter, or matters in a different way?**

**EBB:** Race definitely matters. I think many people think of it as a trans-national field but that eliminates the significance of race. My own take on this is that all fields of scholarship require hard work and learning by whoever is doing them. They are not the possession of some particular group of people, or that some particular group of people can better write about it. When I am writing about African American history, being African American does not help me understand a particular issue or time better. Understanding comes from research, not osmosis. So I think it is not so much a question of who can, i.e. has the ability to study as it is in the power dynamics of academia, the questions of who gets to write, who gets to publish, who gets listened to. The real question is whether people who are working in African American Studies are conscious of the power dynamics, conscious of their privilege, and conscious of how to create the inclusions for other people to get to do this work. So for me this is a question that is less about who has the ability to study and understand African American life and culture, because for anyone who wants to do this it requires hard work regardless of your racial, ethnic, or national background. It is more about academic politics.

As for whether Europeans feel welcome, we can take the Collegium for African American Research as a good example. Composed of scholars from all over Europe who do African American studies, CAAR is a space in which European and U.S. scholars of African-American Studies are developing collaborations and on both sides people's work is invigorated. But it is collaboration that works against creating a structural dynamic where African American scholars themselves are not heard and not listened to. There's no postracial era in academia any more than in political life. Race is definitely important; that has to be recognized. But good collegial relations are also quite possible.

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