

Agnieszka Graff  
William Glass

## Introduction

### **Gender and Sexuality: American texts, contexts, controversies**

In her contribution to the volume *Women's Studies on the Edge* (2007), feminist scholar and prominent Americanist Robyn Wiegman reminds us that academic feminism is, to put it gently, a troubled field. From its very inception it has been haunted by contradictions, such as that between feminism's ethos of anti-institutionalism and the need to gain legitimacy in the academia (and thus gain institutional momentum). Then, scholars spent much of the nineties questioning and even dismantling the central categories developed during their field's founding years, the 1970s. This internal critique—undertaken, among others by Judith Butler, Joan Scott, Denise Riley—led to a radical rethinking of such categories as subjectivity, experience, and even “women” as a foundational referent for both knowledge and activism. What has happened since, Wiegman argues, is the development of “an idiom of failure,” a sense of disappointment, failure, or even betrayal permeating the field. This has much to do with feminism's inbuilt tension between its self-perception as both a form of critical inquiry and a movement for social change. It is an unresolved tension between “knowing and doing” as Wiegman puts it (38-41). Needless to say, women's and gender studies have also been under steady external attack from the conservative right, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. These dangers, tensions, and self-doubts notwithstanding, the study of gender and sexuality has earned what seems to be permanent home in the academia—and an especially spacious one in the field of American studies.

This home is in fact older than we tend to think, as it pre-dates the establishment of gender studies, and even women's studies, as a discipline. It is interesting to note that some of the now classic texts of American studies—Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) and Susan Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977)—are in fact studies of the role played by gender in the construction and negotiation of national identity in the U.S. Without necessarily sharing (or in Fiedler's case, anticipating) feminist political commitments, and without using the category of “gender” as we use it

today, these works read “America” as a heavily (and somewhat awkwardly) gendered construct, a culture obsessed with manliness, but always somehow found lacking in it. Thus, long before “gender and nation” became a favorite frame for academic conferences, long before “the crisis of masculinity” was theorized by men’s studies, long before feminism took root in the academic world, Americanists had been doing “gender studies” as they tried to unravel what “America” has meant to past generations.

Reread today, Fiedler and Douglas both appear oddly dated and yet strangely familiar. Their works anticipate some of today’s scholarly debates about the relationship between the American national identity and various heavily gendered cultural genres and structures of feeling. Narratives that are seemingly only about gender (about what it means to be a man or a woman) have long served an entirely different function—that of proving the sentimental glue for national feeling, legitimizing both racist policies as well as imperial and nation-building projects. This is the central argument of Lauren Berlant’s influential *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008). Another recent argument that bridges gender, nation and affect is Amy Kaplan’s *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2005), whose opening chapter links the ideology of domesticity with that of imperial expansion.

U.S. culture’s obsession with masculinity, and the recurrent theme of masculinity’s imagined “crisis” are anything but a new phenomenon. Both were observed and thematized—sometimes mockingly, sometimes in earnest, and often in a complex interrelation with race—by some of the country’s greatest writers and intellectuals. Henry James did it in Ransom’s famous rant in the *The Bostonians*; Norman Mailer did it in practically all he wrote, but perhaps most prominently in *The White Negro*; James Baldwin demystified it all in many of his essays and in the haunting story that links lynching with white heterosexual identity formation, “Going to Meet the Man.” Although intersectionality has made its way into European gender studies, and the links between race and gender have long been noted by European scholars of nationalism (notably, by George Mosse), the persistence of these themes seems somehow peculiar to U.S. culture and to American studies as a field.

The above considerations have only one purpose: to demonstrate that the theme of the present issue is by no means a departure from *The Americanist’s* business as usual. To examine gender in U.S. culture is not to engage in some guilt-driven “add and stir” effort, where the “added” party is women, members of sexual minorities, or transsexual/transgendered people, while what is stirred in is their history as a group, or their “contribution” to the otherwise gender-free “mainstream” culture. Gender and sexuality are no marginal concern—they are right at the center of what American studies has done for over half a century.

The two fields have overlapped for decades, sharing not only a number of interests and political sympathies, many of which grew out of the sixties' radicalism, but also two key theoretical and methodological transitions of recent years: (1) from a study of issues and groups rooted in identity politics to radical constructionism and intersectionality as both theory and method of analysis, and (2) from the study of the United States as a certain geographical and cultural space where events and texts happen, towards a critical analysis of national identity as an ideological construct always in the making, one that is transformed by texts and events. The significance of critical race theory and the recent transnational turn in American studies are both equally significant to feminist, queer and gender studies.

This intersection—between race and gender—is examined in the interview with Elsa Barkley-Brown which opens the volume. Specifically, the editors and Professor Barkley-Brown discuss the contested images of African American women and their role as representatives of the nation. Beginning with a *Currier and Ives* print portraying the Statue of Liberty as an African American mammy, the conversation ranges over various twentieth century representations of African American women in film (*Imitation of Life*), literature (*Push*), popular iconography (Mammy and Jezebel), sports (Debi Thomas), but the focus is on the nexus between black women and America. Not surprisingly, many of these constructions were used to undermine black women's ability to act as representatives of the nation and so questioned their right to citizenship and their contribution to American society and culture. However, recently, some artists, authors, and film-makers have deconstructed these images and reinscribed them with different meanings that sought to remove their stigma. Of course, the most powerful illustration of both the ongoing legacies and the possibilities for change is the place of Michelle Obama as First Lady. On the one hand, a subtle, and at times not so subtle, racist subtext to media commentary about her body harkens back to stereotypes of obese mummies or promiscuous Jezebels unable to control their appetites. On the other hand, Michelle Obama's dignified manner and presentation serves to promote a new way of looking at African American women. As Barkley-Brown notes, "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."

In our call for papers we asked for contributions that would link the themes of gender and sexuality with that national identity. We asked if there was something specifically American about the way the themes of gender and sexuality issues are handled in the U.S. We also encouraged our contributors to consider how national identity and nationalism—their affirmation, critique, or rejection—have interacted with discourses on gender and sexuality. We were not

disappointed. The contributions to this volume suggest that gender is not just an aspect of national life, but an important axis along which national life is defined and negotiated. Legal and ideological struggles over gender and sexuality, in other words, are one of the crucial sites where a given collectivity establishes the boundaries of the normal, the acceptable and the familiar—the limits of what counts as “us.” **Rosemary Weatherston** demonstrates this well in the opening essay of this issue. Though easily mistaken for a sign of rising tolerance and the imminent end of homophobia, the increased visibility of drag queens in American popular culture of the 1990s is read here as an appropriation: the drag queen’s “co-optation into the role of homosexual informant,” the “flip-side” of the New Right’s backlash against the increased visibility of homosexuality was in fact a form of commodification. In Weatherston’s view, the “legal struggles pitting lesbian, gay, and queer civil rights activists against religious and conservative groups ... [are] most accurately understood as contests over ‘the grammar of identity construction.’ ... Instead of arguing over the right of homosexuals to exist, homosexual and anti-homosexual agendas alike shared in a representational struggle over the public meaning of ‘homosexuality.’ Sexual orientation had become a distinctly semiological battleground.” Thanks to a parallel drawn with similar uses of Black culture in the 1950s, the argument resonates with far broader implications about what he calls “the grammar identity construction” in general.

The next article also looks at recent popular culture: **Jennifer Skinnon** examines representations of women—most significantly, pregnant women—in post 9/11 post-apocalyptic film. Reading movies such as *The Island* (2005), *Children of Men* (2006), *The Happening* (2008), *WALL-E* (2008), and *Surrogates* (2010) through recent studies of fear culture (Altheide, Faludi), Skinnon provides a vivid example of the interrelatedness between gender and nationalism. Offering plenty of evidence from just one film genre, the author argues that since 9/11 American pop culture has packaged traditional gender roles—narratives that feature women as self-effacing caregivers themselves in need of protection, men as valiant protectors—as the inevitable response to danger. “This can be seen perhaps most clearly in the current ideology of motherhood, society’s defining role for women. Representations of this role (often through the treatment of pregnant bodies) and the anxieties surrounding it in some pre- and post-apocalyptic films released since 2005 ... demonstrate a discursive context that proffers the pregnant female body (and by extension the social construction of motherhood) as a source of redemption for individuals and society-at-large.”

The dynamic interplay between national identity and the way gender roles are imagined is also clearly visible in public controversies over collective memory and forms of commemoration. An interesting analysis of such a struggle is

offered in “The Black Gash of Shame” by **Monika Żychlińska**, an essay that employs psychoanalytic categories to examine the gender dimension of controversies over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Its “earthy” design, its peaceful merging with natural setting, emphasis on personal pain, and above all the message of reconciliation with the past and acceptance of loss are—to put it simply—viewed as not “masculine” enough to satisfy the traditional yearning for celebratory heroic memory. “Submitting to the traditional code of remembrance which underscored the notion of heroism, many veterans wanted to gain social recognition through the assertion of their heroic actions. .... Adopting a psychoanalytical perspective, we may conclude that their efforts were an attempt to deflect the threat of castration and to assert their masculinity”—she writes.

The next two articles, though very different in theme and time frame (they deal with historical moments almost a century apart), may usefully be read together. Both examine how gender and sexuality are discursively constructed in American courts. In an article titled “White Slavery: the Private, the Public, and the Color Line” historian **Barbara Antoniazzi** revisits the famous white slavery trial of Belle Moore (1910)—a classic example of how legal measures seemingly pertaining to sexual mores and “protection of innocents” in fact served to strengthen and police racial boundaries, legitimizing segregation. She argues that “in Progressive Era New York, the agitation around white slavery became functional in carrying out adjudications and laws . . . which ended up setting standards of ethical sexuality that effectively re-implemented the color line and redefined feminine ideals.” Antoniazzi examines the case with tools from discourse analysis and speech act theory, a theoretical frame that allows her to show how words spoken in a legal realm transform “the matter of myth into hard legal substance,” stigmatizing the mulatto as a “living sign of racial mixing [and] propagator of corruption,” and preventing her not just from passing for white but, more significantly, for respectable.

On the other hand, in “The Device that Dare Not Legally Speak Its Name,” **Phoebe C. Godfrey** argues that the ambiguities and ironies of the Texas law proscribing the sale of dildos save “for educational purposes only” suggest ways that legal discourse “represented the sexual ideology of patriarchy,” attacked lesbian sexuality in particular, and sought to regulate female sexuality in general. In a careful study of the Texas legal code, the court cases that challenged it, and the feminist debates over the use of dildos and vibrators in sex play, Godfrey provides “a concrete case study to see the ‘theory in practice,’ thereby ultimately increasing our understanding of the ways in which our sexualities are created, defined, controlled, and transformed ... through the actual passing, enforcement and at rare times, the fortunate overturning of sex laws.”

The question of black masculinity was touched on in passing in our interview with Professor Barkley-Brown in our discussion of *The Color Purple* and *Push*, but essays by **Gerald Naughton** and **Aneta Dybska** focus directly on this topic. In “Inapproximable Domestic Ideals: Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave’ as Invocatory Narrative,” Naughton argues that Madison Washington, Douglass’s main character, represents not just a challenge to the feminized Uncle Tom of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the dominant domestic ideology of the time but also makes a case for revolutionizing that ideology through the inclusion of black men in it. If Douglass’s novella argues for the incorporation of African American men into the mainstream national creed, then George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* may suggest what happens to notions of masculinity when the mainstream marginalizes black men and, indeed, literally excludes them through imprisonment. In Dybska’s analysis, Jackson’s prison letters show how Jackson used an alternative nationalism, the Black Panther ideology, to create for himself “a black masculinity that is autonomous, self-disciplined, cerebral” and control his identity “by claiming a freedom to define himself in relation to the homosocial/homoerotic environment of the prison, the racial hierarchies of power, as well as the gendered society at large.”

With the last three articles this volume ventures into analysis of gender and sexuality in literature. **Krystian Grądz’s** “Elegy: Directionality and Gender/Sexuality Marking within the Genre” reexamines the development of elegy as a genre through the lens of contemporary social and literary theory, in particular psychoanalytic theorizations of mourning, loss, and melancholia. Grądz develops a complex argument about the way homosexuality and death were linked, perhaps even merged, in collective imagination during what he calls “the social war on AIDS,” and traces how this contributed to stigmatization of gays as a minority. He then goes on to focus on AIDS elegies, arguing that they constitute a contradictory or paradoxical textual phenomenon, wherein “the anticipation of death makes the lives of those afflicted by the disease perform the spectacle of mourning.”

The final two essays deal with literary fiction by women writers, asking us to contemplate the transgressive dimensions of what may at first sight appear to be traditional feminine activity. In her “Negotiating Gender with a Spatula: Foodways and Gender in *Fried Green Tomatoes*,” **Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis** draws readers into a close examination of Fannie Flagg’s immensely popular novel. Referring to works in anthropology of food and to French feminist theory, she argues that, paradoxically, the preparation, distribution, and consumption of food are employed in Flagg’s text as “a metaphor for rejection of female submissiveness and passivity.” The characters use an activity traditionally associated with the feminine role to carve out a space of subversive female power and bonding.