Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2018

Slavery on Screen / American Women Writers Abroad:
1849-1976

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12369>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.12369

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFA)

Electronic reference

Jeanne Boiteux, “Melynda Price: “When Black Mothers Weep’: Race, Motherhood and Anti-violence Activism in Detroit”, *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2018, Online since 09 September 2019, connection on 01 February 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12369> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.12369>

This text was automatically generated on 1 February 2023.

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Melynda Price: “When Black Mothers Weep’: Race, Motherhood and Anti-violence Activism in Detroit”

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- 1 This conference, which was organized by Hélène Quanquin and Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, was held on May 30th, 2018, at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle as an opportunity for guest speaker Melynda Price to present her latest work. Price, a professor of law at the University of Kentucky, specializes in African-American studies and is the author of *At the Cross: Race, Religion and Citizenship in the Politics of the Death Penalty* (2015). Her interests include the intersection of the concepts of race, gender and citizenship, as well as the “politics of punishment,” a term borrowed from the work of sociologist Erik Olin Wright on the American prison system. The paper she presented in May 2018 was inspired by her observation of the contemporary activism of mothers in the Black Lives Matter movement, such as the mothers of victims of police violence Trayvon Martin, Amadou Diallo and Sean Bell. Ms. Price situates these women’s work in the long history of the post-Civil Rights era of black mothers’ activism. This has led her to the Detroit organization Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD), a history of which she presented in her paper, “What Would Mama Do? Save Our Sons and Daughters and Anti-Violence Organizing Among Black Mothers of Murdered Children in Detroit.”
- 2 Melynda Price started her presentation by describing the July 1986 incident in which Clementine Barfield, who was then at a rally to support the strike led by 7,000 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Detroit, lost her son to youth violence. At a gas station, a man opened fire on the car driven by the eldest Barfield son as he was driving his brothers to school. As a result, one of Clementine’s sons was permanently injured, and the other, fatally shot. Up until then, Clementine Barfield had never really felt the impact of the rising tide of violence then

endemic in Detroit; she later declared she could have seen the signs, had she paid more attention. In the late 1980s, Detroit was but one of many large metropolitan areas whose inner-cities were plagued with drug trafficking and criminal violence, which police crackdowns only compounded. Children and youth were unwitting victims of the war on drugs, and when they were black, their murder often went unacknowledged. It is in this context that black mothers rallying around Clementine Barfield created a multi-pronged anti-violence organization to defend their families.

- 3 Melynda Price identified the circumstances surrounding the creation of what became SOSAD as representative of larger trends. 1986 was characterized by a reshaping of inner cities, a growing awareness of and concerns for the economic downturn, and their instrumentalization by government officials to rationalize the war on drugs. By the mid-1980s, Detroit had become a largely black city; not only does it occupy a special place in African-American history, but local organizational efforts were replicated in other large cities.
- 4 Implicit in this study of SOSAD's contribution to the urban justice movement are the twin issues of impact and representativeness. One of the premises of Ms. Price's work is that SOSAD is both indebted to earlier black activism and had an impact on the forms that activism could take in the 1990s and early 2000s. From that perspective, at least some features of BLM may be traced back to the movement pioneered by Clementine Barfield and others in 1980s Detroit.
- 5 The first feature of the organization Melynda Price highlighted was the intentional link its members made between their personal lives and a larger political context. Clementine Barfield's move to politics stemmed from a very intimate event—the death of her child—but the personal motto to which she clung in the aftermath—"What would mama do?", which soon became "What are you going to do?"—put her in relation with older black women of her family. She was able to translate her grief into political action precisely because she knew what to do. Ms. Price reminded the audience that church participation has been linked to political participation among black women, and Clementine Barfield could draw upon her personal experience as a community organizer and upon available resources—networks, spaces—that had existed since the pre-Civil Rights era. She first arranged meetings for families affected by youth violence, providing them with support groups to guide them through the mourning process. Soon, the group expanded, became SOSAD, and developed a broader anti-violence agenda. The transition was reportedly intentional—Clementine Barfield and others felt it was possible to move beyond mourning and towards making a change, having an impact on the community at large. It was also, in a way, a transition from remediation to prevention, and that process would need to mobilize an entire community. Melynda Price showed how SOSAD used the language of community, and how that language expresses deeply held beliefs about the nature of their mission. Both parenting and ending violence were apprehended as a collective responsibility; SOSAD members saw themselves as parents to their community, even when they did not have children themselves.
- 6 Melynda Price gave detailed examples of programs created and sponsored by SOSAD. The organization tried to deal with the different forms violence could take: committees on gun control were created, as were initiatives to prevent drug use. Education may be perhaps singled out as one of the most salient features of SOSAD. As a parent and an activist, Barfield saw it as her responsibility to educate both children *and* local

politicians. She thought it necessary not just to listen to children's lived experiences as witnesses of crime, but also to make people in power aware of the human consequences of this epidemic of violence. Other programs included using gardening as a social justice tool, for both its concrete and symbolic benefits, supporting families through legal proceedings, putting pressure on state officials to pursue offenders, and, most significantly, telling the stories of the murdered children. BLM mothers have had a similar interest in taking back control of the narrative. Once more, this initiative was both inward- and outward-looking: ensuring that these children's stories did not end with their deaths, and convincing the prosecution that they really were victims. That the status of "victim" is not easily granted to black children and youth highlights the specific issues faced by black anti-violence activists.

- 7 These outside forces were not the only source of struggle for SOSAD members. Melynda Price also studied the structure and membership of the organization and found that tensions existed between parents who saw their children as victims of drug trafficking, and others whose children were participants in the drug trade. As a woman who also took on leadership roles in her church community, Clementine Barfield ran into conflict with ministers who felt that they were or should be in charge. These, however, were not the chief cause of SOSAD's decline in the mid-1990s, which Melynda Price identified as a lack of funds. In her survey of post-SOSAD anti-violence activism, she notes that other related groups keep operating in large American cities. Mothers of Murdered Sons, now Mothers of Murdered Children, has a prominent Philadelphia chapter known for helping Trayvon Martin's mother publicize his death.
- 8 Towards the end of her talk, Melynda Price went back to considerations about the context in which SOSAD came into existence. She links Clementine Barfield's activism to a tradition of self-help in African-American communities. This tradition, compounded by the political isolation which Detroit residents experienced in the 1980s, led to the widespread view that change could only come from residents themselves. That it was mothers who led the way is not, according to Price, a surprise. "Black motherist politics" are to be understood as an expression of women's emotional interconnectedness. Motherhood, and family, more generally, were seen not first and foremost as a biological reality, but as an emotional bond. This non-conformity to white conceptions of family may have shaped the media criticism faced by black mothers, and to which black mothers' politics also responded. Overcoming stereotypes to become a powerful interest group, black mothers were reacting, in the 1980s, not just to youth violence, but to what they identified at its roots, including the recent economic downturn.
- 9 In her conclusion, Melynda Price estimated that what happened in Detroit was critical in shaping the national conversation, at a time when local courts and governments were reluctant to handle racial issues. She emphasized not only the concrete forms taken by this brand of anti-violence activism, but also the concepts of justice, fairness and responsibility which SOSAD helped articulate. To her, this case study gives us a new understanding of community responses to drug wars. Ms. Price ended her talk with a reminder that her interest in the project came from her own coming of age in an inner city at the same time period, as well as the experience of her cousin's death to gun violence.
- 10 The conference was followed by three detailed responses before the audience was allowed questions. Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry (Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle) highlighted

Ms. Price's choice to focus on Clementine Barfield as a personal entry point into SOSAD's history. She noted that we should also consider the increasing number of black politicians serving in elected positions in Detroit as a factor in the success of anti-violence activism. To hark back to the long tradition of self-help in African-American communities, she cited Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar's work *Streets of Hope* (1994), which showcases women's participation in Boston community organizing. Black women are now receiving increasing recognition for their role as organizers in their communities. Prof. Le Dantec-Lowry also underlined the interesting contrast between the stereotypes mentioned by Melynda Price, including the "welfare queen," the black matriarch and their "crack babies" with the actual work SOSAD did. She asked the speaker questions about the management of the organization, including issues of funding. Publicity was another matter that came under scrutiny. Barfield became a well-known figure, and went on appearing on talk shows: did this level of publicity have an impact on SOSAD's influence on policy? Prof. Le Dantec-Lowry added that place, like law—and the failure of local institutions to create or enforce laws—is part of the specific structures of exploitation to be studied in an intersectional perspective. Regarding Melynda Price's remarks on motherhood as an emotional—rather than biological—connection, she reminded the audience of the way women are perceived as more nurturing, and raised to better deal with emotions. There is a perception of women as mothers, which may explain fathers' lack of visibility within the organization. Finally, she linked SOSAD's emphasis on narrative to the larger problems and genesis of African-American history: what is at stake is creating visibility, shedding light, rewriting the narrative.

- 11 Melynda Price agreed and mentioned the fact that Emmett Till's mother insisted on an open casket funeral and that the photographs be circulated in the press, specifically as a way to fight back against the erasure associated with lynchings. Black women in particular took to new technologies—like newsletters, and later talk shows—as part of this strategy of publicity and were early adopters of social media platforms like Twitter, Vine, and Snapchat. These platforms are those used by BLM activists. However, Prof. Price added that part of it is also linked to traditional black funeral culture. It is a part of black funeral culture that people be handed funeral cards with the person's name and photographs. The idea behind these is that there should be something for the living to take away. As for budgetary issues, SOSAD's budget was made up mostly of small donations. At a critical junction, General Motors stepped in and paid their taxes; they also received a few grants from the city.
- 12 Hélène Quanquin (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), making bridges to her own work, commented that the biographical approach helps balance uniqueness and representativeness and asked how Clementine Barfield saw her own experience, as well as whether Melynda Price had considered writing a collective biography. She then commented on periodization, raising the central question of how SOSAD can be linked to BLM. Citing her personal work on male abolitionists who became feminist activists as a consequence of intimate connections, she brought to the table the notion of infra-politics, and how resistance could take different, sometimes unexpected forms. Resistance through daily tasks can make us reconsider the domestic space as a political space. Lastly, she asked about the differences and similarities between women and men's involvement. Were father allies? Did they participate in different ways?
- 13 Melynda Price noted that fatherhood was indeed important to SOSAD members, and that fathers joined when the initial support groups morphed into the organization.

Minutes reveal that some questioned the fact that the spokespeople were mothers. Today, fathers are often present at rallies, but their involvement is often not part of the coverage. In the end, it all seems to boil down to a question of what is emphasized—or not—in the mainstream press.

- 14 Other remarks dealt with families' political involvement in the 1980s. Comparisons were made to the homeless families movement, which received traction because of the family label that guaranteed that recipients were firmly within the bounds of state benevolence. In the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, other parents mobilized their identity as family members in different ways. In that sense, we were asked to consider the 1980s as a moment when families became political agents. Melynda Price agreed that black women were responding to certain issues which affected their entire families. They saw work, and the decline of the automobile industry, as one of the roots of Detroit's problems, alongside drugs, racism, undereducation, and loss of community control on unemployment. Ms. Price argued that the notion of Detroit's black community as families is often lost, even in the academic discussion, in questions about fathers and the role they played. Fatherlessness has become the sense of what the problem was, and not plant closings.
- 15 Audience questions followed, dealing with the—in fact non-existent—difference in media coverage of murdered sons and daughters, Melynda Price's writing practices and background, and her study of the selection of juries and the way outsiders can participate when they are on the "inside". Throughout the discussion, Detroit was characterized as a very "Southern" northern city, which led participants to consider the matter of racialized lack of resource. Melynda Price was asked to identify what ideals of the African-American family have been articulated, and she mentioned the existence of romanticized narratives surrounding the experience of migration. It is with a lighter pop culture reference to the Twitter feud between singer Kanye West and other black artists that the discussion section concluded, with Melynda Price reminding the audience that "it is not uncommon for black people to have internal conflicts about what the best political solutions are for their concerns, and even what the sources of their concerns are."
- 16 Eventually, the debate and the conference ended on considerations on Twitter as the archival material of the future. Certainly, the many varied questions that were asked are a testament to the salience of Melynda Price's research interests in the current academic climate. Her focus on black women as mothers is part of the broader reassessment of women's involvement in black social movements. She is similarly breaking new ground with her choice of an approach that connects different types of actors—mothers, ministers, schoolchildren, local politicians and businesses—and reveals the interconnectedness of the networks to which they belonged. As participants noted, such works that contribute to filling the gaps in the history of black social justice movements may be of particular interest to specialists of the BLM movement—"rewriting the narrative" in more ways than one.

INDEX

Subjects: Actualité de la recherche

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