

# Teaching & Learning Guide for: American Quarterly

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“The Black President Hokum.” *American Quarterly* vol. 63 no. 1 (March 2011): 33-59.

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## **Author's Introduction**

I wrote this article because I wanted to understand the cultural life of black presidency and analyze the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to have a black president. Why, for example, does the black president only ever come at the butt of the joke or at the end of the world? How has the Obama presidency tapped into a reservoir of symbols, narratives, anxieties, and fantasies of black political participation? The black feminist analytic I employ in this essay helps me deconstruct how the appearance of the black president in American popular culture functions to reproduce the regulations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. By “reading” the black president through a black feminist lens, I argue that if we understand the “black president hokum” as the tragicomic, melodramatic lens through which black presidency has been screened by American popular culture, we can begin to deconstruct how black political participation at the highest level of the state functions at a symbolic level as both an expression radical discontent and a containment of that very expression.

## **Author Recommends:**

**Daphne Brooks**, “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8.1 (2007): 180-204. <http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/meridians/v008/8.1brooks.html>

This is an article about black feminist cultural politics. Discussing performances by R&B singers Beyoncé Knowles and Mary J. Blige in the wake of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, Brooks shows how the two performers improvise expressions of black feminist discontent in a historical moment the “public and sociopolitical voices of black female discontent remain muted, mediated, circumscribed, and misappropriated.”

**Kara Keeling**, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

*The Witch’s Flight* is anchored in Keeling’s analysis of “the black femme function,” the way that the cinematic appearance of the black femme in films such as *Set it Off* points to a “radical elsewhere.” This is a challenging book that dares students to take visual culture seriously, to read what appears on screen *and* what disappears from the frame. Employing theories of affect and visual culture by Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Frantz Fanon and others, Keeling shows how the black femme haunts American culture: the black femme forces us to recognize how categories of race, gender, class and sexuality carry within them alternative potentials that point to alternative organizations of life.

**Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai**, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 20.3 (2002): 117-48.

[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/social\\_text/v020/20.3puar.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/social_text/v020/20.3puar.html)

Beginning with a provocative question about contemporary American culture—“How are gender and sexuality central to the current ‘war on terrorism’?”—Puar and Rai analyze counterterrorism as a racial logic, a form of discipline, and an academic field of study tied to the heteronormative exercises of state power. Exploring the entanglement of heteronormativity and patriotism, the authors analyze an episode of the prime time drama *The West Wing* that aired after the September 11. Here, they will help students understand “the ways in which sexuality, gender, deviancy, normality, and power are knotted together in this TV drama” (135).

**Jared Sexton**, “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing,” *American Quarterly* 61.1 (2009): 39-63. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v061/61.1.sexton.html>  
Deconstructing the appearance of black masculinity as state authority--the appearance of the “institutionalized black complicity with the structures of white supremacy”--in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Sexton analyzes the “ruse of engagement” in post-9/11 American film. Reading Antoine Fuqua’s 2001 film *Training Day* as a case study, Sexton asks students to consider what it means that “nearly every noteworthy black male actor of the post-civil rights era has made this professional rite of passage as officer, detective, sergeant, lieutenant, or chief” (42).

**Wahneema Lubiano**, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992): 323-62.

One of Lubiano’s important essays on black American life in the post-civil rights era, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels” analyzes the national narrative of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearing to show how representations of Anita Hill conformed to stereotypes of black women and marked the boundaries of normative femininity. Helping us understand how the stereotypes of the hyperprofessional black “lady” and the “welfare queen” dissimulate the functions of American state power, Lubiano offers an important black feminist analysis of contemporary history and the symbolics of state power.

**Lisa B. Thompson**, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Another important analysis of the image of the black “lady” as a symbol of African American propriety, Thompson’s *Beyond the Black Lady* explores the narratives of real-life figures such as Anita Hill and Condoleezza Rice, along with fictional narratives by Kasi Lemmons, Jill Nelson, Andrea Lee, and others. Reading sexuality in post-civil rights narratives across genres, Thompson analyzes how these texts “fracture notions of class and racial authenticity and present black women renegotiation social and sexual traditions in which mores, codes, and practices are more relaxed” (8).

### **Online Materials:**

#### **A More Perfect Union**

<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>

This site contains the text as well as the full-length video of Obama’s March 2008 speech, “A More Perfect Union.” In the 38-minute speech, Obama outlines his vision for 21<sup>st</sup>-century American race relations.

#### **Audio: Janelle Monáe, ‘Smile’ and ‘Mr. President’**

<http://www.okayplayer.com/news/Audio-Janelle-Monae-Smile-Mr-President.html>

Contains the full-length audio version of performer Janelle Monáe’s “Mr. President,” a song which I briefly discuss at the end of the essay.

#### **Black Bush**

<http://www.comedycentral.com/videos/index.ihtml?videoId=11923>

Contains the video to the 7-minute comedy sketch, “Black Bush,” performed on The Comedy Central’s *Chappelle’s Show* in April 2004.

#### **Internet Movie Database: *Head of State***

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0325537/>

Contains information about the 2003 film *Head of State*, a film about a Washington, D.C. alderman (Chris Rock) who runs for president.

**Black American Feminisms: A Multidisciplinary Bibliography.**

<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/subjects/blackfeminism/>

Compiled by Sherri L. Barnes at the University of California, Santa Barbara library, this site lists resources in black feminist scholarship across the disciplines. It includes sections such as "Arts & Humanities," "Social Sciences," "Education," "Health, Medicine & Science," as well as subsections such as "The Academy," "Religion and Spiritualities," and "Lesbian Subjectivities."

**Sample Syllabi**

**Course: Race and American Popular Culture**

Week 6: The American Presidency

*Screenings:*

"Isaac and Ishmael," *The West Wing* Season 3 (Original Airdate Oct. 3, 2001)  
*Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998)

*Readings:*

Edwards, Erica. "The Black President Hokum." *American Quarterly* 63.1 (March 2011): 33-59.  
Puar, Jasbir K., and Amit S. Rai. "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots." *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117-48.  
Parry-Giles, Trevor, and Shawn J. Parry-Giles. "Introduction: The Presidency, Prime-Time Popular Culture, and U.S. Nationalism." *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006: 1-19.

**Course: Representations of Women in the Media**

Weeks 7-8: Stereotypes of Black Women and the American Government

*Screenings:*

*Head of State* (dir. Chris Rock, 2003)  
*Bulworth* (dir. Warren Beatty, 1998)  
Erykah Badu, "Bag Lady" (Music Video, 2000)

*Readings:*

Brooks, Daphne. "'All That You Can't Leave Behind': Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 180-204.  
Edwards, Erica. "'The Black President Hokum.'" *American Quarterly* 63.1 (March 2011): 33-59.  
Iton, Richard. "Variations on the Solidarity Blues." *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008: 131-194.  
Thompson, Lisa B. "Spectacle of the Respectable: Anita Hill and the Problem of Innocence." *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009: 21-42.  
James, Joy. "Depoliticizing Representations: Sexual-Racial Stereotypes," in *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999: 123-150.  
Lubiano, Wahneema. "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).

**Focus Questions**

How do the contradictions of the post-civil rights era surface in American popular culture?  
What, or *how*, does the black president mean in post-civil rights American culture?

How are the stories we tell ourselves about black presidency caught up with *normativities* of race, class, gender, and sexuality?