

AHA Advocate Talk: Melissa Harris-Perry



Samantha Ellison: I was wondering if you could talk about your book *Sister Citizen* and a little bit about your personal motivation for writing this book?

Melissa Harris-Perry: Well probably the single most important motivation was professional, for my job. My job as an academic is to consistently keep up with research and to produce journals and articles. The first book was about African American politics and it included some work around gender, but didn't include the lived experience of black womanhood. In a lot of ways *Sister Citizen* came out of all the questions I still had after I writing the first book. The experience of being an African American woman and what difference that makes in how we do politics. I started writing this book right around the time my daughter was born and then I went through a divorce, was raising a daughter, and was a single parent for a short period of time and was going through the ten year process all at the same time. All of that happen over the course of writing this book. I feel like all of that informed my experience of it. My sense of the barriers, challenges and sense of possibilities that we face being African American women. All of was certainly informed by my personal experiences.

SE: Could you expand upon what you meant by recognition and misrecognition of black women within politics?

MHP: There are two pieces, one is the academic interest in this in having an office next to a brilliant person named Patchen Markell who wrote a great book called "Bound by Recognition." When you have a colleague who is that smart and you are having these conversations they help to form what you want to write about. He writes about very different

things then I write about, but he helped me frame recognition as an important political problem that we should take on but I think the public part of recognition has really influenced me, not only for the work I have done in being in radio and television, but the fact of social media. You just get all these experiences of being misunderstood. I realized that it wasn't just about misunderstanding it was about a set of assumptions about who black women are even before we speak. Misunderstanding assumes that someone listened to you and then just misunderstood what you had said. Misrecognition means from the moment they saw you and looked at you there was a set of expectations about who you were as a person. I don't know if I talked much about it in my book, but I have on air, any black woman who has ever changed her hair has experienced how recognition alters when you're wearing your hair straight, or when you're wearing a weave, or when you are wearing extensions or wearing your own natural hair. The assumptions about who you are and what you think or what your politics are can be pretty upsetting. My very personal experience was intersecting with having a colleague talking about it academically.

SE: Could you talk about some of the stereotypes that black women face and where they originated from? How does shame evolve out of the construction of these stereotypes?

MHP: I think stereotypes originate from all different places. I talk about in the book how Jezebel stereotypes emerged during slavery and the mammy stereotype emerges after slavery during the period destruction and redemption and the strong black woman stereotype emerges kind of as a response to those things. I think they all come from the same purpose, they are always trying to serve a system that has male privilege and white privilege at the top. I think what is important to point out here is that its not as though white men are the enemies of black women, I think that is kind of a narrow way to think about it, but rather that white supremacy and patriarchy as systems or racism and sexism as systems are the enemy. Not only are the systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, racism, and sexism the enemies, but they are very flexible, and they are very willing to change shape. For example Jim Crow at the lunch counter. I am trying to trace these things over time, not to say that things are exactly the way they were in slavery but to say that these things are in some way connected. We like to think that the strong black woman is a positive stereotype but in fact it is one that can lead African American women to not being able to put their own policy issues on a political agenda. They don't even think about the things that are most important to themselves they are thinking about how can I protect black men against the system. So then this has an incredible negative affect and part of the fact of why it is so negative is that you don't even see it.

SE: How do you think Michelle Obama has changed the face of black women, if at all?

MHP: I think she does two important things. Whenever you have a circumstance where someone like Michelle Obama becomes incredible popular, by being popular she doesn't make it okay for all black women. In the book I talk about the impact of Michelle Obama and Shirley Sherrod. The fact that Shirley Sherrod could be treated the way she was and now the

fact that we have Michelle Obama as first lady. If I was writing the book today, which actually I am writing the introduction for the paperback edition, I am writing about Michelle Obama and Susan Rice. On the one hand you have Michelle Obama helping her husband get reelected and she has very high approval ratings, and everyone one loves Michelle Obama and at the same time you have clearly a racialized genderized attack on Susan Rice. So it's not simply about being who she is that she wipes away all of these gender and race stereotypes but I do think she begins to chip away at it. So she doesn't wipe out the ideas, but she begins to erode the idea that African American women can be exclusively one thing. I think part of the thing that is so exciting about how Michelle Obama does this is that simply her authentic self feels powerful. When you are watching her you don't feel as if you are watching someone who is putting on but you feel as if you are watching someone be herself. And I feel that there are some many few opportunities for African American women to be themselves publicly that there is something very powerful in that.

SE: How has your study of race and gender evolved over the years?

MHP: I became far more interested in gender in the second five to seven years than the first because the first book I wrote is very much focused on race and then the second book became an intersectional book and I became more clear in my feminist analysis. In my past two years my research has crumbled to the floor with my new media life. You know I was just talking about how I have no trouble managing teaching and TV, but it is very difficult to manage the research. And undoubtedly, that is one part of my life I look forward to getting back into once my media life is over because that is the thing I miss the most. But the book I am working on right now, is a book about what we know from all different fields about informational conversations and contact. The name of the book is "Race Talk." Its not an original research book, it is synthetic. I am looking at what architecture and urban planning can tell us about integrating communities. What does social psychology tell us about encountering different people from ourselves? What does sociology tells us about people from all different backgrounds going to school together? I look through these fields and begin answering questions to how they deal with interracial contact and conversation and managing issues of privilege, power, and race.

SE: If you could get rid of one chronic injustice what would it be and why?

MHP: It would be inequality within the school system. I think that this impacts everything that our children go to many different schools. We I think about the possibilities and what happens to the children and our communities that is where I would have to begin.