

# **DISGUST, VISIBLE VENERATION, AND ROSA PARKS**

## ***African American Visions of a Democratic America***

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**MELISSA VICTORIA HARRIS-LACEWELL**, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, 336 pages, ISBN: 0-691-11405-6, Cloth, \$37.95.

**BARBARA RANSBY**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 496 pages, ISBN: 0-8078-2778-9, Cloth, \$34.95, ISBN: 0-8078-5616-9, Paper, \$19.95.

**ANGE-MARIE HANCOCK**, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York: New York University Press, 2004, 210 pages, ISBN: 0-814-736-580, Cloth, \$60.00, ISBN: 0-814-736-70X, Paper, \$20.00.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Rosa Parks's death on October 24, 2005, generated a deep emotional response from the nation as a whole, with an extraordinary political and institutional mobilization among African Americans. Parks was first honored in memorial services in Montgomery, Alabama; she was then flown to Washington, where, as a result of swiftly passed legislation, she lay "in honor" on October 30 and October 31 in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. Parks was next honored in a memorial service at Washington's Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church on October 31, which was followed by a marathon funeral service on November 2 at the Greater Grace Temple in Detroit. She now rests in peace in the city she last called home, Detroit.

Such a show of political unity among religious institutions, the traditional civil rights organizations NAACP and National Urban League (NUL), newer groups,

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charismatic religious leaders, nationalist leaders, and elected officials was extraordinary. The nation's political leadership, including the president and congressional leadership from both Houses and Parties, was prompted to pay honor in one or more of these locations. Subsequently, the U.S. Congress recognized Parks with the passage of legislation on December 1, 2005, to create a statue in her honor to be placed in National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol, the first such recognition for an African American.

The extraordinary attention bestowed on Parks belies the understanding that Ange-Marie Hancock's *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of The Welfare Queen*; Melissa Harris-Lacewell's *Barbershops, Bibles and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*; and Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* bring to their analyses of African American political ideas, values, and participation. Given the very visible veneration of Rosa Parks, an outsider to the American political system might think that Black women, though perhaps not so honored in the past, are certainly viewed at present with considerable respect by a broad swath of the national elite and popular society, and also recognized across racial lines. But these authors, all African American women, directly confront the contradictions between American public opinion and political behavior. Their work offers a considerably more complex vision of American public life, and the place of African American women in it. In particular, Hancock, Harris-Lacewell, and Ransby treat, respectively, "the welfare queen," the historical role of one Ella Baker (a political leader whose death in December 1986 was largely unmarked), and the process by which Black political opinion is created and recreated through "everyday talk" in the Black public sphere. After having considered these analyses, the honors accorded to Rosa Parks take on a different meaning.

I have organized this review essay into several parts. First, I address interconnecting and overlapping themes found in the work of all three of these women academics. Each approaches the common points somewhat differently, but the themes permeate their works. I next address methodological issues associated with the works, before turning to a more direct discussion of each book. Finally, I return to the question of Rosa Parks, using the work of Hancock, Harris-Lacewell, and Ransby to put her into a more appropriate context.

## INTERCONNECTING AND OVERLAPPING THEMES

Ransby's biography of Baker traces her attendance at Shaw Academy and Shaw University from 1918 to 1927, as well as her family's individual and long-term financial support for the institution. Baker's parents not only paid "tuition for Ella while she was a student at Shaw," her mother continued support after her daughter graduated—"as part of her work with the Women's Auxiliary Progressive Baptist Missionary Association" (Ransby 2003, p. 48). Ransby's analysis of the development of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American institutions shows how Shaw helped create political resources such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the members of which helped create the Black freedom and civil rights movement, as well as the Black public spaces in which Black everyday talk occurs.

Ransby's *Ella Baker* is about a Black woman in a public space. Shaw, the oldest southern Historically Black College or University (HBCU), was also the first to admit women. Black women have consistently played unique leadership roles in public life, often being the *first woman* in many situations. Shaw embodied the

contradiction of offering a first-rate education to its students while posing second-rate positions for them in later life. Women were situated in public educational space, but constrained in roles that emphasized sexual respectability. These constraints fell by the wayside late in the twentieth century, as the National Welfare Rights Organization brought women on welfare into the public arena and, Hancock argues, helped to create “the politics of disgust.”

Each of the authors wrestles with this issue, but it is an especially important theme for Ransby’s work on Baker:

In essence, some middle-class black leaders felt that only those blacks who conformed to the dominant culture’s notion of social respectability should be held up as deserving of civil rights and full citizenship (p. 120).

Baker herself sat at the intersection of these tensions and wrestled with them: how one should define oneself according to race, gender, and class; and whether socially respectable mores should be followed. Ransby carefully explores Baker’s disinterest in the Black elite’s preferences, but also shows how Baker was shaped by them. Anna Ross’s (Baker’s mother’s) family owned land and was literate, while, on her father’s side, the family of Blake Baker (named after a Confederate general) was landless and illiterate.

These issues sit at the center of African American public life; consequently, they are threaded throughout the works of Hancock, Harris-Lacewell, and Ransby, and they unify my discussion of their work. These concerns shaped: the work of turn of the century Black Club Women and their interest in directing their daughters’ education (addressed by both Ransby and Hancock); the activities of the Black political elite in Montgomery, including their “choice” of Rosa Parks, the middle-aged matron, over Claudette Colvin, the pregnant unmarried teenager, for the bus boycott (Ransby 2003, p. 292); and the religious leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and their definitions of gender, including who was qualified to “lead” and to organize. Baker might act in that latter role, but only male ministers such as John Tilly and Wyatt T. Walker could hold the formal title of Executive Director, whatever the talents of a woman such as Baker might be. In Hancock’s analysis of representatives’ voices in the floor debate on the Welfare Reform legislation in 1996, those same concerns reappear among members of U.S. Congress. Harris-Lacewell also found the “welfare queen” debated by the college students who participated in her experimental discussions (p. 130), and that gender is an especially sensitive and important subject in “everyday Black talk.” While Black “everyday talk” is Harris-Lacewell’s term, Ransby also examines it in her discussion of Baker’s early years in New York City, when she met African American writer and philosopher George Schuyler. Schuyler’s salon hosted continuing interactions across a range of political positions and encouraged “animated discourse that helped define African American public life” (Ransby 2003, p. 79).

Zeno, the African American carriage driver in New Orleans with whom Harris-Lacewell introduces *Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*, articulates both integrationist and nationalist sentiments. She describes his “unique Afrocentric tour” as one that takes his riders “all over the map ideologically. Riders emerge . . . with a sense of both physical and ideological whiplash” (Harris-Lacewell 2004, pp. xvii–xviii). The expectation of ideological consistency is one with which all of these authors struggle, some more successfully than others. Harris-Lacewell and Ransby lay the groundwork for understanding the considerable complexities incorporated within the African American philosophical universe. Each pushes the boundaries

within her study and tracks the options for the formation of the ideological possibilities, however contradictory or complex they might seem. Hancock points to the inconsistencies, but she treats them as though African American leadership ought to have a more consistent set of beliefs; there is a certain surprise when she analyzes the content of congressional speeches by Black members and women leaders and finds them also redolent of the language and values reflecting the prevailing negative posture toward the “welfare queen.” Perhaps her research design, structured to explore the national media and congressional floor debate including Black and White officials, encourages an expectation that Black officials will be less likely to reflect such sentiments. Ransby’s and Harris-Lacewell’s works, by contrast, are positioned to focus more distinctively on Black political institutions, thereby avoiding the problems and expectations of Black-White ideological comparisons.

The discussion of the African American public sphere and Black counterpublics is an especially strong theme in Harris-Lacewell, but it also appears in Ransby and, to a more limited extent, in Hancock. Harris-Lacewell observes that “In pursuit of racial goals, black counterpublics have often sought to suppress the internal differences of gender, class and sexual identity that mark blackness” (p. 6), thus introducing us to these strong tensions at the outset of her work. She sets out to explore those internal differences within the Black counterpublic, challenging Dawson (2003) and arguing that, although with substantial differences, the counterpublic continues to exist.

Harris-Lacewell’s study of the ideological beliefs of ordinary citizens through an examination of their “everyday talk” (pp. 21, 81) is unique, but is partially reflected through Ransby’s work on Baker, whose political work sought to reach and mobilize non-elites. For her part, Hancock conducts in depth interviews of welfare recipients in order to understand their views on welfare.

Another important theme that Harris-Lacewell finds in one of her small group “everyday talk” experiments is the impact of the leader, especially the male leader assigned the role of minister, upon the ideological direction of the group. A female leader in the role of professor had no similar effect. While her second experiment didn’t replicate this male religious leader effect, it inevitably points to the importance of gender in African American leadership traditions. The male religious “leader” exerted a powerful stimulus upon this group; in fact, ironically, the *male* leader elicited a stronger *feminist* response from one of the North Carolina Central University groups than did the female “professor” (pp. 120–125). Ransby’s Baker, raised in a deeply religious home, and a student in a religious boarding school and college, struggled throughout her career with the restriction to males of sacred ministerial roles. This was a deeply important, even painful issue for her.

Hancock has the capacity to conceptualize the “politics of disgust,” to look it in the face, to explore it, to name it “the public identity of the ‘welfare queen’,” and to analyze it from a variety of perspectives. This theme was a constant in the 1990s, but one which, before this book, seemed disparate and less centered. This same theme, regarding the issues and political figures who symbolize less than attractive values, is also addressed in the works of both Ransby and Harris-Lacewell. As Cathy Cohen (1999) has emphasized, marginalized groups tend to reflect the stigmas imposed upon them by the larger society. Ella Baker’s work was so important because she chose to ignore the boundaries that African American social and political elites used to marginalize the poorest in their midst. Harris-Lacewell concentrates on the less-idealized ideological developments in everyday talk. While everyday talk is not as marginalized, nor does it necessarily provoke disgust, it carries an element of stigma, simply by representing in straightforward fashion the ordinary, core values of

African Americans. Harris-Lacewell replicates Hancock's analysis in her Kennedy-King College experiment, in which a discussion of the womanist/feminist question on the effects of welfare reform generated two discussions framed in "welfare queen" terms (p. 130).

Hancock also considers *intersectionality*, a term which she identifies as reflecting the interaction and intersection of the variables of race, gender, and class. She explains the importance of intersectionality as follows: "the argument for intersectional approaches encourages us to go deeper within the data, beyond superficial interracial or cross-gender analyses" (p. 140). Harris-Lacewell and Ransby also actively explore multivariate, intersectional analyses, and constantly consider the intersecting impact of these major factors.

All three of these authors explore the role of Black women, especially poor Black women, and consider reactions to Black women's political activism, especially responses to them from within the Black community. Hancock conducted seven in-depth interviews with welfare recipients, while Ransby discusses Baker and her role in the church. The placement of women in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), for example, was literally outside of the organization. Ella Baker had invested enormous energies in her years as Acting Executive Director of the SCLC, but she was not even considered for the permanent position. Nor did Baker even expect to be considered for the position.

## THE VALUE OF METHODOLOGICAL VARIETY

While some of the work of these authors overlaps topically and thematically, the three books incorporate distinctive approaches and methodologies. Hancock and Harris-Lacewell are political scientists, while Ransby is a historian. Each author has read very widely in African American studies, although this is most evident in Harris-Lacewell. The political scientists' research is atypical for their field, although more typical of African American political scientists in its breadth of intellectual consultation. Hancock and Harris-Lacewell know the literature in political science more generally, but they have also made significant use of work on Black politics by African American political scientists in particular. I note this because it is, frankly, rare. Hancock also incorporates, given her focus on the "public identity of the welfare queen," sources on Black women drawn from political science, women's studies, and African American Studies. In addition to her mastery of the political science field in public opinion, Harris-Lacewell draws upon an unusual combination of contemporary as well as less recent literature in African American studies.

Ransby's encyclopedic use of the historical literature on civil rights, Black history, politics, and education is more intensely concentrated than is that of the other two authors; reading her meticulously documented book provides insight into the current state of knowledge on many subareas and topics. Unlike historians who cite only the archival collection from which a letter or an interview is drawn, Ransby has generously shared the precise locations of the communications she traces, thereby offering to other scholars the clues needed to follow up her research, to consult similar areas in the collections, and to use her research to complement their own.

Ransby characterizes what she is doing as "biography" (pp. 9, 373), but she has actually written multiple biographies of individuals, political and religious organizations, educational institutions, and ideological movements. These smaller portraits, of people, institutions, political organizations, and places that shaped or were shaped by Baker, are sprinkled liberally throughout the work. Among them are: George

Schuyler (pp. 78–82); Shaw University (pp. 48–50); Father Divine (p. 88); Lillie Jackson, who headed Baltimore's NAACP branch (p. 122); Martin Luther King, Jr., (pp. 189, 244); and Robert Moses (pp. 249–252). Ransby also demonstrates an extraordinarily meticulous ability to track historical issues, names, and problems throughout Baker's long and complex political lifespan. This "biography" of Ella Jo Baker is actually a multidimensional encyclopedia of American politics. Ransby's numerous smaller analyses of individuals and institutions are an extraordinary contribution to the literature and will serve to stimulate further research on many intersecting subtopics.

Political scientists Hancock and Harris-Lacewell skillfully integrate an innovative array of methods. Each employs quantitative analysis, either survey research (Harris-Lacewell) or content analysis (Hancock), complemented by different types of qualitative analysis, including interviews and historical research (Hancock) and the use of experimental focus groups and ethnographic research (Harris-Lacewell). Their incorporation of several methods allows for analysis followed by further exploration and discussion. These combinations of thoughtful, multidimensional work are an extraordinary development; the authors' findings are the richer for it, and more convincing. This is an especially welcome development in the fields of African American studies, political science, and for scholars of intersectional topics. Understanding the situation of African Americans *requires* combinations of approaches rather than a singular approach. Historical developments, complemented by cross-sectional public opinion analysis, content analysis of newspapers and congressional speeches, small group experiments and focus groups, in-depth interviews, in addition to ethnographic observation of Black spaces designed to understand processes of opinion formation and shaping, are but some of the methods employed in these two works.

While Hancock and Harris-Lacewell are highly skilled in empirical, and quantitative research methods, even their quantitative work is broader, and more fluid than the more conventional work that tends to select a type of static measure, such as a roll call vote, to analyze. Their improvisational quantitative methods allow us to conceptualize how African American public opinion grows through "everyday talk," or how the "welfare queen" public identity, which dominated the media's coverage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 in Congress, shaped the discussion of its Black and/or female Congressional *opponents* as well. Taken together, the work of these two talented young political scientists holds promise for a future of exciting new work and the training of new cohorts of scholars capable of integrating analysis along several dimensions simultaneously.

There are some limitations to the authors' work, and I here offer brief observations on each. Hancock analyzed five national newspapers, but she made no effort to explore the electronic media. She does reference televised news content, but it would have been interesting to include more detailed discussion and analysis of this new and important medium. It would be worthwhile to pursue her discussion beyond the analysis of the content she presents, in order to understand how it works in shaping political ideas in the larger, networked world. Another problem with Hancock's emphasis on newspapers is that the decline in newspaper subscriptions had certainly begun by the late 1990s; by 1996, the World Wide Web was already expanding at a rapid rate. Although newspapers were not yet fully as present on the web as they are today, one must consider how much these new types of media account for the replication and dissemination of the public identity of the "welfare queen."

The mix of methods that Harris-Lacewell incorporates is challenging to pull off; she is largely successful, but some questions do remain. She offers no explanation of why or how she selected Orange Grove Missionary Baptist Church for one of her

ethnographic studies. At the end of the chapter she remarks that the church members she has described are “average Durham residents,” but without any analysis of the larger Durham or Raleigh-Durham Black population, or the Black population of church attendees, we are simply left to wonder. Even if the church or its attendees were atypical, some discussion of the environmental characteristics and context would be helpful here (p. 77).

The Black college small group experiments involve the use of leaders in one set (North Carolina Central University [NCCU]) and not in the other (Kennedy-King College [KKC]). These experiments were based on specific choices made by Harris-Lacewell, however she does not discuss or explain the gender distribution of the participants, though it may have had some effect on the results (p. 125). Another concern is the difference in context for the experiments between NCCU and KKC. A historically Black university in a mid-sized southern city and a largely Black city college on the Black South Side of one of the nation’s largest cities are organizationally, historically, and ideologically distinct. Harris-Lacewell mentions these differences (p. 148), but she does not address their methodological significance.

Finally, the barbershop chapter involves ethnography by proxy: Harris-Lacewell and Quincy Mills, a University of Chicago graduate student in history, investigated and wrote about the barbershop *Truth and Soul*. Mills conducted the observations and was responsible for developing notes from them. However, Harris-Lacewell explains, “Although the chapter is written in first person in Quincy’s voice, I am the author of the chapter” (p. 277, footnote 1). This methodology introduces subtle but important challenges and tensions in understanding whose voice and whose analysis is responsible for the work.

Ransby’s *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* has been thoroughly honored and recognized by the Southern Regional Council (SRC), the American Historical Association (AHA), the Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH), the Organization of American Historians (OAH), the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, and the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America. These are only the awards listed on the back cover of the paperback edition—by now I’m sure that there have been more. Ransby’s work deserves the accolades it has already won; specific factual critiques will be left to the professional historians. Here, I offer only a few observations.

Ransby’s work is exceptionally detailed, and her use of citations is more extensive than is typical even for historians. After awhile it becomes manageable and rewarding to follow the careful documentation regarding the historical issues she raises. Ransby lays the foundation for her discussion of Baker by characterizing her as “an organic intellectual” and then sets out to describe her intellectual life in a largely successful way, as I will explain in the next section. However, one does sense frustration in Ransby’s search for Baker. Ella Baker left many papers, including what must have been voluminous correspondence, but she left no diaries, wrote no autobiography, and shared little in the way of personal, private observations. Baker was tracked by the FBI for years, but they also found her a challenging subject; they didn’t know, for example, that she was married. They even mistakenly assumed that her husband (whose name she almost never used) was a female relative living with her (p. 102, footnote 168).

Ransby’s work is extraordinarily disciplined; she demonstrates the capacity to follow Baker, to search for the sources of her ideas in people, organizations, and movements. But she doesn’t seek a single answer to her questions about Baker. Rather, she keeps coming back to her questions: how does Baker manage and resolve Zeno’s (cited in Harris-Lacewell’s introduction) tensions between the integrationist, nationalist, and

economic equality issues associated with class, race, and gender? Through Ransby's discussion, these questions emerge as a lifelong challenge—they're not something to be answered for all time—which is why Ransby addresses them at each stage in Baker's life.

## DISTINCTIVE THEMES

### Confronting the “Politics of Disgust”

Hancock's *Public Identity* is probably the most difficult of the three volumes to address, because she is dealing with one of the core problems, a deeply stigmatized symbol, one that generates *the politics of disgust* and taps into the historical American hatred of and distaste for African Americans:

I argue that the public identity of welfare recipients—created from the misperception that they are all or mostly single mothers who are poor and African American—interacts with a context I term the politics of disgust to produce legislative outcomes that are undemocratic both procedurally and substantively (p. 6).

Hancock takes a careful look at the historical development of the “welfare queen” through examining the “national welfare reform discourse” that led up to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. Hancock employs an intersectional approach that incorporates race, gender, and class. She explains the complex genesis of judgments made in the public sphere:

The prevailing political context in the public sphere will influence the capacity of individuals to express their experience, a key dimension of participation. . .

Citizens cast as the subjects of public identities that marginalize them, based on multiple aspects of their identities, are potentially further alienated from political participation than traditional resource-based models of voting behavior may suggest. First, a prevailing political context that is continually filled with negative stereotypes, moral judgments and frames concerning a particular group of individuals lumped together based on shared characteristics ascribed to them by others lessens the motivation to express one's lived experiences in the public sphere. . . Second, a group's fellow citizens are similarly constrained in their abilities to accurately interpret and attend to the communicated experiences of marginalized individuals . . . despite any of their best intentions (pp. 17–18).

Hancock reviews the historical literature on gender, race, and social policy based on Skocpol's work on widows' pensions. Linda F. Williams's *The Constraint of Race, Legacies of White Skin Privilege* (2003) was published the year before Hancock's *The Politics of Disgust* (2004). Williams begins her analysis earlier, to include the post-Civil War programs of the Freedmen's Bureau, as well as a direct comparison of the treatment of Black and White veterans and their widows. She shows that patterns that appeared immediately after the Civil War became the foundations for policies that explicitly distinguished by race, gender, and class, thereby privileging White citizens. Patterns established in the late nineteenth century were reinforced and strengthened during the twentieth century, and thus would have been especially useful for Hancock's work.



Williams takes on a more intense exploration of intersectionality, specifically, race, gender, and class, as well as the development of American social policy. Williams traces social policy and the development of White skin privilege from the late nineteenth through the end of the twentieth century. She tracks American social policy history through an examination of the Freedmen's Bureau, Civil War veterans' programs, Roosevelt-era social welfare programs, and other policies through the end of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Williams shows how, even in the 1880s, there were similar emphases on marriage, support from the father, and legal, political, and economic control of the Black woman that prefigured those of the late twentieth century.

Hancock examines major national newspapers' treatment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, and concludes that "The news media, by either intent or neglect, played a role in linking the social construction of the welfare population to public policy options" (p. 87). She also finds a lack of solidarity with welfare recipients among both female and Black members of Congress. And yet this shouldn't be so surprising, given that intersectionality more than hints that a single variable doesn't control for the other two. So Senator Mikulski could have lacked solidarity with welfare recipients because they matched on only one of the three variables; similarly Black House members who voted for the legislation matched only on the race variable, not necessarily the gender or class variables.

Hancock argues that the "politics of disgust breaks down racial solidarity among blacks who might be predicted to favor social welfare programs for a variety of reasons" (p. 135). Hancock's analysis and recommendations reveal some contradictory elements. On the one hand, "The politics of disgust turned against welfare recipients threatens democratic processes of legislative oversight and public hearings" (p. 154). On the other hand,

The goals of American democracy require us to integrate groups that are marginalized based on the inaccurate stereotypes and moral judgments *we* carry around in our heads . . . just as oppression is complex, so must resistance aimed at fostering empowerment demonstrate a similar complexity (p. 155).

Early on, Hancock argues that it's difficult to confront the four features<sup>2</sup> of the politics of disgust simultaneously, but by the conclusion she argues, "Thus, we must confront all four aspects of the politics of disgust simultaneously to create a space for the *eradication of the 'welfare queen' public identity once and for all*" (p. 155; emphasis added).

Hancock has identified the problem: the appearance of the "welfare queen" image as a public identity; she has taken the image seriously throughout her study, but she moves too quickly to suggestions for change. Her own analysis suggests some of the reasons: it is not clear that it will be possible to address the problem either by challenging the image through *simultaneous* confrontation of all four aspects, or through a *complete elimination* of the image. The quotation also suggests a compulsion for expelling, ridding, *cleansing* the image from our public space. But, according to Williams (2003), elements of the "public identity" have been a foundational part of the nation's social policy legacies for over 120 years. Dealing with such a core psychological element requires long-term strategies, "slow respectful work" (Payne 1995) from multiple directions, of the sort carried out by Ella Baker.

### In Search of Ella Baker

Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and The Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* is formally a single biography. But in order to understand Baker, Ransby brings

together an extraordinary array of biographies: of people, of organizations, and of institutions from throughout Baker's life. Ransby's long-awaited work brings Baker into view, but, as detailed and as complex as the volume is, Ransby can't quite capture her—Baker is too much—which the author herself acknowledges in the conclusion: “trying to sum up and repackage a life full of detours, depth, and contradictions is like trying to hold water in your hands. You can feel it, but you can't quite contain it” (p. 373).

This “failing” is less about any limitations in Ransby's work than about the complexity of the life, or the lives, of Ella Jo Baker. Ransby brings into closer view the range of people, organizations, and movements with which Baker interacted, by which she was influenced, and which she influenced. But holding all of those traditions together, mastering and integrating them would require . . . an Ella Baker, and, as Ransby has learned in her quest, Baker was fiercely protective of her private space and personal life. We know so much more about her than before and yet are left thirsting for more, even at the end of a 374 page text with another 47 pages of notes.

Earlier works on Baker by Morris (1986) and Payne (1995) were not intended to be full biographies, but they captured some sense of the woman, her commitments, and her drive. Joanne Grant's 1986 film, *Fundi: the Story of Ella Baker*, and her 1988 biography, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*, both failed to capture the full woman—certainly an impossible task without the rigorous, disciplined march through many of the intellectual and political movements of the twentieth century brought into view by Ransby's *Ella Baker and The Black Freedom Movement*.

Ransby also successfully captures the contradictory nature of Baker's philosophical views. She tracks Baker's anger, even rage, about the dominant role that the ministers played so often in public life, in contrast to the kinds of roles she created for herself and was allowed to fill. She was always the scribe, the executive secretary, the interim director—the unpaid manager and organizer who made the movements possible—in the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, the SCLC, and the SNCC. The men were the public face and voice of the movement who earned the adulation of the masses through their charismatic leadership, but that acclaim was based on the organizational work and support of women such as herself. We are brought to understand something of the tensions Baker felt later in life through Ransby's introduction of her as a very young child in her grandfather's Baptist Church in Warren County, North Carolina. As his favorite, she sat behind him while he preached and, in contrast to many other settings, Reverend Ross was intentionally non-charismatic and disavowed the more emotional Black church culture described by Aldon Morris (1986). If Reverend Ross's worshipers began to show emotional response, he would have them escorted from the church (p. 35).

Baker's philosophical origins were complicated; despite her work with Black individuals and groups, she was never a nationalist, and Ransby reports that the Young Negroes' Cooperative League was the only all-Black organization of which she was a member. It is important to understand that Baker's parents lived in the Second Congressional District in eastern North Carolina; the district was majority Black at a time when there were very few such districts in the United States. Furthermore, the family resided in the Blackest county in the district: Warren County (pp. 38–39). The fact that her maternal family members were literate landowners is discussed by Ransby as contradictory (p. 44), and as a class issue that distinguished the family from the rest of the Black population. Charles Payne's (1995) analysis of Black Mississippians capable of challenging the state's intense racial hierarchy centers on landowners beyond the constraints of sharecropping and land tenure. It was their very economic independence, Payne argues, that gave them the capacity to be

politically independent. He uses this as a variable to point to those people best able to live and act independently—economically and politically—as Baker proceeded to do herself, making her able to imagine this type of behavior for others as well.

Baker left powerful legacies throughout the century during which she lived, in the lives of her “students” in SNCC, in the construction and growth of the NAACP in the 1940s, in the organizational support for the SCLC in the 1950s, and in the creation of SNCC as the “shock troops” of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Previous work on Baker has emphasized her role in keeping the SNCC from being absorbed by one of the more established Black organizations such as the NAACP and the SCLC (Grant 1998; Morris 1986; Payne 1995). Ransby also focuses on this, arguing that it gave Baker the opportunity to encourage college students to shape their own organization outside the conventions of the Black church, of the Black elite, and of those unwilling to consider the interests of the Black poor as legitimate concerns for their political agenda. She wanted to keep the student movement beyond the control of the older established forces. I have speculated on occasion about a counterfactual: what might have been the impact on the NAACP and the SCLC, if this youthful energy could have been used to infuse, challenge, reorder, and regenerate some of those previous patterns? Since Baker worked or had contact with many significant organizations, one might think that she knew that it was unlikely that the students could have remade these older groups, but the idea is certainly worth reflection. Ransby concludes, “In essence, Baker’s leadership from 1960 to 1966 helped create within SNCC the space where *traditional hierarchies* of race, class, and to a lesser extent, gender could be turned on their heads” (p. 364; emphasis added). That type of change probably could not have happened *within* the established Black organizations.

Finally, Ransby reflects on the issue of gender and how Baker had a profound effect through teaching her students to be open to alternative ways of exercising power and authority. Ransby’s interview with Robert Moses, along with her own analysis, helps capture some of this:

In Bob Moses’s words, “She had this black woman’s manner, and she carried that with her into the dangerous arena of radical politics”. . . By the 1950s, she maneuvered within these spaces as a middle-aged black woman with her purse tucked under her arm, her hat carefully placed, and her good southern manners. To Moses, a woman taking the dignified and self-respecting manner that was a familiar feature of black family life into the rugged political domain was nothing short of revolutionary (p. 257).

Ransby shows that Baker’s formal presentation of self was not identical with that of being a lady; she was in fact uninterested in the gender boundaries and definitions of the times. As Baker said in explaining her difficulties with the ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1950s:

I wasn’t a fashion plate . . . [and] I made no bones about not being a fashion plate. I did not hesitate in voicing my opinion and . . . it was not a comforting sort of presence that I presented (Baker cited by Ransby, p. 184).

### The Revelations of Everyday Talk

Harris-Lacewell’s *Barbershops, Bibles and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* is a stimulating, even delightful, work that reshapes the way in which we conceptu-

alize the development of Black political ideology. Along with its important theoretical findings, the book will also be useful for course readings and lively discussion at the graduate and the undergraduate level. The work focuses on four political ideologies: Black Nationalism, Black Feminism, Black Conservatism, and Liberal Integrationism (excluding Black Marxism and Liberal-Egalitarian ideologies), along with the idea that these are sustained through the mechanisms of “everyday talk.” *Everyday talk* occurs in “settings . . . free from the discursive restrictions of the racial mask that African Americans must don when they venture beyond the veil . . . exchange interpretations of the truth; to understand the complexity of the polity world; link their individual experiences to group narratives” (p. xxiii). The author has chosen public spaces of churches, barbershops, Black colleges, and locations of Black popular culture to test her hypotheses.

Harris-Lacewell seeks to “restore ideology,” which she defines as “public discourse that is rooted in the life and thoughts of ordinary men and women . . . [and that] gives group members a way of communicating by beginning with a set of critical, shared assumptions that govern interaction” (pp. 15–16). She identifies six functions for Black political ideology and arrays them along four continua that move beyond several conventional political continua. The six functions are: left versus right, within versus outside the state continuum, and accommodationist versus militant definitions of politics. Harris-Lacewell then argues that these functions operate in the service of several tasks that help array the four ideologies in different combinations and permutations depending on their role, and she has the courage to argue that there is “no single dimension along which one might array these approaches,” nor do they exist in pure form (pp. 20, 32).

From here, the author moves into the fields of everyday Black talk: an atypical Black church in Durham, North Carolina; two colleges, one HBCU (North Carolina Central University) and another Black northern institution (Kennedy-King College—one of the City Colleges of Chicago); *Truth and Soul*, a Black barbershop on the South Side of Chicago; and the popular media, hence the third angle in the triangle of Black public spaces, *Black Entertainment Television*. The findings are distinct and fascinating.

Much of the popular discussion of the ideological differences between Black elected officials and the Black public has centered on the criticism that the Black public expresses socially conservative values (in support of capital punishment, opposed to abortion, etc.) that are largely unreflected by Black public officials. Harris-Lacewell explains this pattern, arguing that African Americans tend

not to act on their social Conservatism when making voting decisions. . . . These discussants imply that political decisions have to be justified by their impact on the *community as a whole*, focused on making changes in unequal circumstances, and cognizant of continuing racial biases. *Conservatism is appropriate only in the personal realm*, not the public (p. 141; emphasis added).

For African Americans, the public sphere is the Black community, and, in that space, conservatism is not appropriate. In some of her experimental groups, “Participants exposed to conservative groups become less Conservative” (p. 136), resist the conservative message, or turn a conservative message into a nationalist one.

Another intriguing finding is that the groups studied, whether led by males or females, showed strong feminism, and also showed lower levels of support for integrationism. She speculates that feminism and integrationism, are “distinct, and perhaps opposing, ideologies” (p. 128). Harris-Lacewell has hit upon an important vein

that needs further probing: feminism is distinctive from an integrationist ideological position, though we tend not to think of it in this way. Womanist feminist positions are thus much more strongly represented in her discussion groups than straightforward feminist (i.e., non-Black) positions. Her womanist respondents tended to be considerably *more* negative toward Whites.

Harris-Lacewell's and Mills's ethnographic study of *Truth and Soul* barbershop offers contextualization for how ongoing discussion develops in a shop in which politics is a frequent subject.<sup>3</sup> The shop is one in which the full range of issues is addressed: the meaning of Blackness in America; the relative importance of race in comparison to gender, class, and sexuality; boundaries of sexual identity; self-help versus government assistance; and tactical separation from Whites. A complex array of ideological positions is expressed (e.g., the men rarely talked about Whites, but a number supported interracial dating). Harris-Lacewell concludes:

Black men through everyday discourse, shape and reshape their political attitudes and worldviews. . . Collective discourse is how they teach and learn. . . The space is instrumental in the daily upkeep of their "soul", which becomes made and remade in their experiences at the shop (p. 202).

*Barbershops, Bibles and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* leaves one with the sense that the conventional understanding of interactions between Black leaders and the larger Black public has been reframed by Harris-Lacewell: because the process of talking is so central to the formation of Black political ideology, the larger Black public has a powerful impact on the development of political values and ideas. Black elites may prompt the larger public, but the elites also respond to the terms of discussion and speak within ideological perspectives talked out in everyday public spaces.

## CONCLUSION

What prompted the decision to open this review essay of new work by Hancock, Harris-Lacewell, and Ransby with a discussion of Rosa Parks, a woman clearly well-loved, respected, and honored in the African American community? Am I challenging that view? Do Hancock's, Harris-Lacewell's, and Ransby's respective works minimize Parks's contributions? Was she *not* the mother "who started our freedom movement"?<sup>4</sup> Parks's death unleashed the emotional power that reflects the core intersectional issues addressed to some extent by each of these authors. If, as Hancock argues, the politics of disgust breaks down racial solidarity among Blacks (p. 135), then Parks, symbolizing the Black middle-class ideal of femininity, united the varying sectors of African American life: religious and secular, womanist and conservative, liberal integrationist and nationalist. Parks was the very antithesis of the "welfare queen." So most of the political actors who had appeared together in October 2005 for the tenth anniversary of the Million Man March were also present at one of the ceremonies celebrating Rosa Parks's life. "The mother of the civil rights movement" was described by the Neville Brothers and others as a quiet, sweet, unassuming woman. That sweetness was often emphasized as she was eulogized.

The harsh realities of Parks's life were much more complicated because of her political activity, and, in many ways, she was a southern regional and Detroit version of Ella Baker, serving as administrative officer in many intersecting organizations: Secretary to the Montgomery Branch, the State and Regional bodies, and the Youth

Chapter of the NAACP, as well as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and liaison for NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (NAACP/LEDF) Counsel Thurgood Marshall as he searched for plaintiffs in what became the *Brown* cases. Congressman John Conyers, in whose office Parks worked after she and her husband were forced to leave Montgomery because of the post-boycott threats to their safety, reported coming to terms with the fact that more people came to his Detroit Congressional office to call on her than to see him. The masses of people, most of them African American, who lined up to pay tribute to Parks in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, to worship at Metropolitan AME in Washington, in Montgomery, or in Detroit, and the days of services in her honor gave testimony, in Harris-Lacewell's terms, to Parks's importance.

The works reviewed in this essay offer a dramatic contrast between the differing conditions leading to the development of, on the one hand, Ella Jo Baker and, on the other hand, the "public identity of the 'welfare queen'." We have gained a deeper theoretical understanding of Black political ideas: how they are sustained over time, some of their foundational elements, the directions in which they move, and how their stability is maintained. I end this essay with questions for the authors, and also for the readers of this journal: Will increased integration, or more precisely changing patterns of Black residence such as increased suburbanization of Blacks and the displacement of traditional Black neighborhoods by gentrification, reshape the type and character of Black institutions? Will the rise of the megachurches generate a different type of Black everyday talk and therefore political orientation? Will the Black media continue their liberalizing impact on the larger Black public? Will the Bush administration's creation of a program of faith-based politics draw Black ministers, churches, and congregations into the Republican party? Or will Harris-Lacewell's analysis, suggesting that Black respondents become more liberal when exposed to conservative viewpoints, be confirmed?

Whatever the answers to those questions may be, Hancock, Harris-Lacewell, and Ransby have given us a rich and complicated body of new work that will provide intriguing analytical frameworks for some time to come.

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## NOTES

1. Williams's work was published in 2003, around the same time as the books reviewed in this essay (Hancock and Harris-Lacewell in 2004; Ransby in 2003). Despite their similar interests none of these authors cites the others' work. Hopefully, this will be remedied in future work, as they discover their overlapping interests.
2. The first feature is "... a perversion of democratic attention," that is, "the process of deliberation lacks the type of attention (to *all* citizens' claims) that democratic theorists deem necessary for a democracy." The second is that "the political context ... is conditioned by monologic, rather than intersubjective, communication among citizens." Third, "many citizens ... succumb to ... what Hannah Arendt calls "representative thinking. ... [or] correspondence bias." The fourth feature is "a distinct lack of political solidarity between citizens who are and citizens who are not part of the target population of the legislation at issue" (Hancock 2004, pp. 6–7).
3. I asked my ninety-two-year-old father (D. James Pinderhughes, Jr.) to read the *Truth and Soul* chapter as I was completing this review essay. He was born in Providence, Rhode Island, and has lived in Washington, DC, since the late 1930s. He reported that the description of the barbershop fit his own experiences. In the barbershop he patronizes, politics is discussed, although he noted that on his most recent visit football and the

Redskins had been at the center of discussion. I also found when I assigned this chapter in a course last year that Mark Reynolds, a Black male student, responded with delight to the material and chose to conduct his own study on the political significance of Black barbershops for his research paper for the semester.

4. Lyrics from “Thank You Miss Rosa,” on the Neville Brothers’ 1989 album *Yellow Moon*.

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