Conversation

Barbara Boswell from the Feminist Africa editorial team speaks to Ghanaian-British film-maker, journalist and fiction writer, Yaba Badoe.

Barbara Boswell: I was introduced to your work through the powerful documentary "I Want Your Sex", which examines representations of black sexuality over more than two centuries. I found the period and the range of material you covered extremely broad - art, photographs, media images. What were the challenges of producing a film that covers so much ground?

Yaba Badoe: I conceived the idea for "I Want Your Sex" myself. It was an idea that I researched, and it was commissioned by Channel 4 Television in the UK. In many ways I think that "I Want Your Sex" was over-ambitious. Each segment of the documentary - the ones on Saartje Baartman, Josephine Baker, Grace Jones, Manet's Olympia, inter-racial "buddy" movies in Hollywood, Mapplethorpe's black male nudes - could each have merited an hour's documentary in their own right. But I chose to gallop through the material as a way of showing that representations of black sexuality haven't arisen out of nowhere. They're based on myths rooted in a history of colonisation and imperialism.

The challenge was to sustain the narrative momentum of a documentary, which covers a lot of ground and is intellectually demanding. I needed speakers and cultural practitioners who knew their stuff and could speak well. I decided to dramatise sections of the documentary - Richard Burton's diaries, Josephine Baker's autobiography and so on - as a means of adding to the texture of the film. Whether I was successful or not, only the viewer can say.

BB: In dealing with racial representation through a visual medium, how do you avoid reinscribing the prejudices you seek to highlight and critique? In "I Want Your Sex", for example, you show in great detail the racist images in order to dissect them. Is the use of these images justifiable?

YB: I think intent is very important in answering this question. I know that some people would never want to show images of Saartje Baartman because they feel that to do so would reproduce the racism to which she was subjected. Working in a visual medium such as television, I have to use images to convey ideas and open up a debate about representation.

For instance, when "I Want Your Sex" was screened on British television, it was the first time that Mapplethorpe's black male nudes were shown on terrestrial television. A couple of years before, during the transmission of a seminal documentary on Mapplethorpe's work, a blank screen appeared in lieu of his male nudes to signify the BBC's censorship of them. A lot of fuss is still made in Western culture about showing male genitalia - the proverbial fig leaf, so to speak!

I know that some sections of Britain's black population were incensed at seeing photographs of naked black men on television. I understand their sensitivity. But I also believe that the transgressive nature of the photographs go right to the heart of white preoccupations about black male sexuality. And in a documentary discussing these myths and representations, it was right and proper that the photographs be shown - in the same way that Saartje Baartman's images were shown. The problem is that images in themselves are so powerful that the eye devours them and the viewer is shocked or gratified without listening to the debate going on about them.

BB: You've studied Social Anthropology and Development Studies. Did this influence your interest in broadcasting and film-making?

YB: Yes, I think doing Development Studies especially was instrumental in my choice of career because the ideas we were dealing with at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University were very exciting. I majored in Women and Development, but the course involved taking a broad sweep of 19th and 20th century social and political history and gaining an understanding of neo-classical economic strategies, socialist strategies, mixed economies - getting a sense of how the global market works, terms of trade, the Tiger economies, and so on. I thought the ideas we were tackling and their potential to change people's lives were monumental.

I guess I went into broadcasting because, rather than restrict myself to discussions among academic "experts" and consultants and others within the development industries, I thought it was more important to disseminate ideas and information about different people, their aspirations and the lives they lead to a much wider, general audience. I went up to King's College at Cambridge University to read English. I changed to the Archaeology and Anthropology Tripos five weeks into my first term because my enthusiasm for English Literature was and remains primarily emotional. I found it hard to relate to the way the English Tripos was designed at Cambridge at the time - chronological (from Beowulf to the present day) and very analytical. So I opted to do Anthropology because it was a subject I was able to approach with a degree of analytical detachment. I make films and I also work as a radio and print journalist and fiction writer.

I was drawn to television because I find it compelling. It's a collaborative medium using images, sound and narrative: intellect, eyes and ears. Although I enjoy working in radio and believe that radio is much better at conveying difficult ideas, television is organisationally a more challenging medium. It absorbs me completely.

BB: What film-making conventions influenced your own choice of genre and form?

YB: As a BBC-trained producer/director, I'd say that the film-making convention I'm most influenced by is British social realism. It's a convention that allows people to speak for themselves, revealing themselves as they go about their daily lives, or describing an event that has changed them forever. I'm concerned with the drama of everyday lives, ordinary events that are significant to the people who live through them, and the daily dilemmas of being human.

BB: You speak about wanting to disseminate ideas about different people to a wider audience in your film-making and writing. Do you find yourself constantly speaking against dominant discourses, and how do you find the space in which to articulate your ideas?

YB: No, I'm not always speaking against dominant discourses. For instance, the last television series I made, six half-hour documentary programmes for ITV about the experiences of volunteers in Kenya, Mongolia and Vietnam, was very much in the tradition of "Brits abroad", trying to make sense of different cultures at the same time as attempting to make a "difference" - improve the situation of poorer countries by contributing their professional skills.

Like much of television, the series worked on several levels. It could be seen as a straightforward travel series, structured like a soap opera, about the adventures of Britons in strange and exotic settings. But as the series unfolds and the volunteers begin their jobs and engage with people they're working with, forming sexual and emotional relationships with them, they begin questioning what they're doing and what impact, if any, they're likely to have. So within what you describe as the "dominant" discourse, there's space for pertinent questions to be asked and implications to be teased out.

Looked at in another way, the series - which did very well for ITV, increasing its share of the audience at that time (midday on a Sunday) by 40% - can be seen as an examination of "whiteness" - the emotional dissonance and self-examination that sometimes occur when Europeans engage with "other" cultures. So even when operating within a populist form such as documentary for a mainstream audience, I'm trying to push the boundaries of the status quo so that a deeper understanding of how human beings respond to each other is revealed.

BB: Is writing fiction a relatively recent endeavour? What motivates you to write fiction when you have a very dynamic and powerful medium - film - at your disposal?

YB: No, writing fiction isn't a relatively new endeavour. I've done bits of print journalism for some time, reviewing books for West Africa magazine and City Limit, writing articles for West Africa, Orbit and The World's Children. I've tried writing fiction off and on for most of my life, including children's stories and a novel for children, which are unpublished. I've had five short stories published by Critical Quarterly in Britain and I'm currently working on a rewrite of a second novel, Looking for Robert De Niro, a social comedy about a posse of black women in south London looking for love and happiness.

I started writing seriously in the late eighties when I resigned from my job with the BBC in order to spend a year in Spain teaching English as a foreign language and writing a novel. For me, writing is a protracted process combining many of the skills I've acquired as a film-maker - a keen sense of narrative structure, clarity of expression, pacing, nuances of texture, and so on.

Film is indeed a dynamic medium, but for a film to work well, you have to work as part of a team. Despite the popular notion of the "auteur" - the person with the vision - film is truly a collaborative medium, combining the skills of the director, camera-person, sound and film editor. A good director manages to draw on the talents of others to create something fresh - a difficult task that depends on the goodwill and talent of others.

When making documentaries I'm able to use my sensibility to convey the stories and emotions of other people, forging them into a coherent narrative. I'm not supposed to make the stories up - a pleasure I reserve for fiction.

BB: What are the issues you try to address through your fiction?

YB: Joanna Trollope commented this year: "The human heart hasn't changed, it goes on and on as mores change. We are reportraying the clichés of life and death and sexual betrayal." These are the themes Joanna Trollope delves into as a writer of popular fiction for women. As far as I'm concerned, I'm interested in the same terrain, but from the perspective of middle-class women from West Africa and the Caribbean living as part of an African diaspora. Though I'm reluctant to describe what I do as reportraying clichés, there's no doubt that the parameters of human experience encourage themes such as love, death and the meaning of life itself, to be examined again and again.

I'm particularly interested in the various ways in which past experience and histories inform our take on the present. I'm also fascinated by the difference between a Western rationalist apprehension of reality, and a view of the world informed by African religious beliefs. My interests have developed in part because, throughout my life, I've inhabited two cultures and been forged by a synthesis of them. Consequently, my experiences of dislocation, recreation and cultural synthesis are part and parcel of the themes and stories I explore in fiction. All the same, my intention is to produce fiction that relates to the lives and experiences of women, no matter where they live in the world.

BB: What you describe as cultural synthesis seems to be reflected in your identifying yourself as Ghanaian-British. How has your subjectivity shaped the subject-matter you choose to explore in your documentaries and fiction?

YB: I describe myself as Ghanaian-British because, although I've spent most of my life in Britain, I was born in Ghana of Ghanaian parentage, and I have a very strong spiritual and emotional attachment to Ghana. I have dual Ghanaian-British nationality. Consequently, I'm in the privileged position of being able to look beyond the usual middle-class British view of the world and entertain other perspectives. It's hard to know where nationality stops and character, personality, and subjective and spiritual inclinations begin.

I remember hearing Toni Morrison talking at the Hay Literary Festival a while back about whether she'll go down in the canon as being a black writer or an American writer. I'm simplifying her discourse of course, but the implication was that when people are categorising the world, to be described as black is considered limiting, and "great" writers somehow manage to transcend race! But Toni Morrison also said that as a black writer working in a racialised world, her project is to give voice to the histories of her people, so that voices that haven't been articulated before are finally heard. I found her talk very, very inspiring. As a Ghanaian-British woman living and working in the West, I'm often approached by broadcasters when they want me to make films to do with race. Race interests me and I have an understanding of it. Yet at the same time, I'm interested in other things as well. I'm interested in how people in other parts of the world - primarily Africa - live and express themselves through music, film and writing.

BB: Your documentaries deal provocatively with issues of race. What have your experiences been as a black film-maker exploring topics of racial identity and representation in an extremely male-centred global industry?

YB: Unfortunately, the sort of documentaries I enjoy making about the developing world are being made much less frequently in Britain because of what's been described as the Americanisation of British television culture - a ratings-driven environment that favours quiz shows and factual entertainment documentaries. So the challenges I'm facing right now aren't because I'm a woman working in a male-centred world, but because the subject-matter I'm interested in doesn't draw large audiences compared to "Big Brother", "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire", and so on. In fact, during the period I've been working in broadcasting in Britain - from 1981 to the present day - white women have made huge advances in the management of major corporations such as the BBC and ITV and independent production companies. When I started out, very, very few women reached the top. Unfortunately, although white women have made gains, black and Asian women still have some way to go behind the camera - where real power matters.

BB: What implications does this "Americanisation" of British television you refer to hold for progressive film-makers and documentary work?

YB: It's difficult to say. I like to think that if an idea for a documentary is strong and well expressed, with persistence and perseverance it will eventually get made. The trick is to know where to go for development funding. Some documentary makers are choosing to go down the theatric route to show their films - Michael Moore's "Bowling for Columbine" is just one example of an American documentary-maker making a scathingly critical, political film about the gun lobby in America. The film has been a huge success on both sides of the Atlantic.

BB: What sorts of strategies do you think are necessary for black and Asian women to get the sort of power you mention above?

YB: I'm not sure what sort of strategies black and Asian women should adopt to get more power in the television industries. First of all, it's important to understand that TV and film are extremely competitive industries, and creating alliances in industries renowned for the size of individual egos, jealousies and petty, destructive squabbles isn't easy. However, support through friendship, shared interests and goals is essential for survival.

The other point to remember is the distinction between engaging in ongoing creativity and participating in institutional management. If women want to get close to power, they have to be prepared to move into management. They have to be willing to "run" things and become part of the institutions they're in. This can be difficult for an individual who takes creativity seriously and wants to continue making programmes.

Finally, irrespective of flexible alliances based on group or gender interests, what's needed above all is a commitment at the very top of the industry to cultural change, so that a multiplicity of perceptions and discourses can flourish in mainstream film and television. This takes a great deal of effort, time and commitment.

BB: What are the challenges of producing transgressive, boundary-crossing work that also satisfies the commercial requirements of broadcasters?

YB: The commercial imperative doesn't necessarily exclude interesting work. Perhaps what you're referring to is the difference between a "jobbing" director, who takes on work to earn a living and a "committed" director, who is eager to push the boundaries of the status quo as a means of self-expression. From my own experience, I'm aware that the two aren't mutually exclusive. There are times when I've made films because I believed in the ideas I was expressing, and other times when I've given a personal twist to a subject I've been asked to film.

Recently I was asked to make an eight-minute feature for a Channel 4 series about the marching season in Northern Ireland. The feature introduced a leading member of the Orange Order in Ghana, and brought him over to Belfast, where he met with a Protestant and Catholic and reflected on the situation there. Only three and a half minutes of the film took place in Ghana, and it was those minutes that interested me the most. How did the Orange Order become established in Ghana? How have Ghanaians been able to recreate this institution into something peculiarly Ghanaian? I'd like to find out. In order to do so, I'm thinking of pitching a proposal to make a radio documentary, because I'm aware that in the present climate, a television audience is unlikely to be given the opportunity to see such a film.

Another example is a documentary film I've been trying to get off the ground over the past year. The year 2004 will be the bicentennial of Haiti's independence - an event I'd like to mark with a documentary film about the three main protagonists of the Haitian revolution. The main terrestrial broadcasters believe that a British audience isn't interested in the only recorded successful slave revolution in history - events that led to the first black republic in the world. My response has been to try to get a black American celebrity on board to present the documentary, in the hope that the celebrity factor will entice a broadcaster on board. As I write, I'm still trying ....

But then again, only last week I was asked to film an interview with Toni Morrison for BBC4 television. I believe that her literary enterprise is an example of work that's become part of the mainstream, yet retains a lacerating, critical edge. So that's a dream come true!

Yaba Badoe is based in the UK. Barbara Boswell has worked as researcher at the AGI and on the Feminist Africa editorial team. She is currently undertaking PhD studies in the US.