RACE-ING JUSTICE, EN-GENDERING POWER

Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality

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Whose Story Is It, Anyway?

Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill

As television, the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings played beautifully as an episode right out of "The Twilight Zone." Stunned by the drama's mystifying images, its misplaced pairings, and its baffling contradictions, viewers found themselves in a parallel universe where political allegiances barely imaginable a moment earlier sprang to life: an administration that won an election through the shameless exploitation of the mythic black rapist took the offensive against stereotypes about black male sexuality; a political party that had been the refuge of white resentment won the support, however momentary, of the majority of African Americans; a black neoconservative individualist whose upward mobility was fueled by his unbounded willingness to stymie the advancement of other African Americans was embraced under the wings of racial solidarity; and a black woman, herself a victim of racism, was symbolically

transformed into the role of a would-be white woman whose unwarranted finger-pointing whetted the appetites of a racist lynch mob.

But it was no "Twilight Zone" that America discovered when Anita Hill came forward. America simply stumbled into the place where African-American women live, a political vacuum of erasure and contradiction maintained by the almost routine polarization of "blacks and women" into separate and competing political camps. Existing within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and in the empty spaces between, it is a location whose very nature resists telling. This location contributes to black women's ideological disempowerment in a way that tipped the scales against Anita Hill from the very start. While there are surely many dimensions of the Thomas-Hill episode that contributed to the way it played out, my focus on the ideological plane is based on the idea that at least one important way social power is mediated in American society is through the contestation between the many narrative structures through which reality might be perceived and talked about. By this I mean to focus on the intense interpretive conflicts that ultimately bear on the particular ways that realities are socially constructed. Ideology, seen in the form of the narrative tropes available for representing our experience, was a factor of social power to the extent that Anita Hill's inability to be heard outside the rhetorical structures within which cultural power has been organized hampered her ability to achieve recognition and support. Thus, Anita Hill's status as a black female—at the crossroads of gender and race hierarchies—was a central feature in the manner in which she was (mis)perceived. Because she was situated within two fun-

damental hierarchies of social power, the central disadvantage that Hill faced was the lack of available and widely comprehended narratives to communicate the reality of her experience as a black woman to the world.

The particular experience of black women in the dominant cultural ideology of American society can be conceptualized as intersectional. Intersectionality captures the way in which the particular location of black women in dominant American social relations is unique and in some senses unassimilable into the discursive paradigms of gender and race domination. One commonly noted aspect of this location is that black women are in a sense doubly burdened, subject in some ways to the dominating practices of both a sexual hierarchy and a racial one. In addition to this added dimension, intersectionality also refers to the ways that black women's marginalization within dominant discourses of resistance limits the means available to relate and conceptualize our experiences as black women.

In legal doctrine this idea has been explored in terms of doctrinal exclusion, that is, the ways in which the specific forms of domination to which black females are subject sometimes fall between the existing legal categories for recognizing injury.[1] Underlying the legal parameters of racial discrimination are numerous narratives reflecting discrimination as it is experienced by black men, while the underlying imagery of gender discrimination incorporates the experiences of white women. The particularities of black female subordination are suppressed as the terms of racial and gender discrimination law require that we mold our experience into that of either white women or black men in order to be legally recognized.

The marginalization of black women in antidiscrimination law is replicated in the realm of oppositional politics; black women are marginalized in feminist politics as a consequence of race, and they are marginalized in antiracist politics as a consequence of their gender. The consequences of this multiple marginality are fairly predictable—there is simply silence of and about black women. Yet black women do not share the burdens of these elisions alone. When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism, and when antiracism does not incorporate opposition to patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other and both interests lose. The Thomas/Hill controversy presents a stark illustration of the problem as evidenced by the opposition between narratives of rape and of lynching. These tropes have come to symbolize the mutually exclusive claims that have been generated within both antiracist and feminist discourses about the centrality of sexuality to both race and gender domination. In feminist contexts, sexuality represents a central site of the oppression of women; rape and the rape trial are its dominant narrative trope. In antiracist discourses, sexuality is also a central site upon which the repression of blacks has been premised; the lynching narrative is embodied as its trope. (Neither narrative tends to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other; the reality of rape tends to be disregarded within the lynching narrative; the impact of racism is frequently marginalized within rape narratives.) Both these tropes figured prominently in this controversy, and it was in this sense that the debacle constituted a classic showdown between antiracism and feminism. The tropes, whether explicitly invoked, as lynching, or implicitly referenced, as rape, served to communicate in shorthand competing narratives about the hearings and

about what "really" happened between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. Anita Hill was of course cast in both narratives, but because one told a tale of sexism and the other told an opposing tale of racism, the simultaneity of Hill's race and gender identity was essentially denied. In this sense, both feminist and antiracist told tales on Anita Hill, tales in which she was appropriated to tell everybody's story but her own.

These competing appropriations of Anita Hill within feminist and antiracist discourses represent a persistent dilemma that confronts black women within prevailing constructions of identity politics: dominant conceptions of racism and sexism render it virtually impossible to represent our situation in ways that fully articulate our subject position as black women. While Thomas was able to invoke narratives that linked his situation to the sexual oppression of black men and thus have his story understood as relevant to the entire black community, Hill remained unable to represent even herself, much less other similarly situated black women.

In this essay I want to elaborate how the cultural dynamics surrounding the Thomas-Hill conflict are better understood in terms of Hill's intersectional disempowerment. My argument proceeds as follows. Addressing first the dominant paradigm for understanding the exercise of gender power, the narrative trope of the raped (white) woman, I discuss how Hill's experience in fact partly fit this rhetorical structure, and how her lack of power can be understood in part through the ways that white feminists have articulated gender domination. Second, however, I highlight Hill's intersectional identity by likewise showing the ways that the rape-trial analogy didn't fit, and how the limitations of traditional feminist discourse worked to suppress the more nuanced experience that Hill was communicating. In the second part of the essay I turn to race discourse and discuss how Hill's experience was partially explicable in terms of the dominant discourse of racial liberation. But this same discourse, embodied in the image of the lynched black man, also worked to disempower Hill in relation to Clarence Thomas.

I. Anita Hill as a Victim of Sexual Domination—The Rape Trope

Anita Hill was primarily presented to the American public as simply a woman complaining about sexual harassment. Her plausibility in that role was dependent upon the degree to which she could be fit within the dominant images of sexual victimization. Those images, in turn, have been heavily critiqued in the feminist articulation of gender politics. My argument here is that one consequence of the feminist movement's tendency to think about gender power and dynamics in terms of what we might call a universalist or essentialist form is that it depicts the structural forms that gender power plays in the white community as representing gender pure and simple. While many elements of the dominant feminist discourse about gender power and sexuality clearly did apply to Anita Hill—for example, the tradition of impugning charges of sexual aggression with baseless allegations of psychic delusions or vengeful spite—the grounding of the critique on white women meant that, in a sense, Hill (and Thomas) had to be deraced, so that they could be represented as actors in a recognizable story of sexual harassment. While white feminists were in general the most consistent and vocal

supporters of Hill, the fact remains that both her lack of fit into the dominant imagery of the violated madonna and, more specifically, the feminist movement's inability to develop alternative narratives comprehending the ways that women of color experience gender power, led to the particular dynamics that many of her supporters themselves were unable to understand, dynamics that included the rejection of Hill by the majority of black women as well as white women.

Feminist legal scholars have frequently used rape as a framework to capture both the way women experience sexual harassment and the way the law shapes the claims of the few courageous women who come forward. Feminist scholars and activists have long criticized the way the adjudication of sexual aggression is animated by myths about women, about assumptions regarding their veracity and their integrity, and by doubts about their grasp on reality. In both rape and sexual-harassment cases the inquiry tends to focus more on the woman's conduct and character rather than on the conduct and character of the defendant. As a consequence, rape law does less to protect the sexual autonomy of women than it does to reinforce established codes of female sexual conduct.

Part of the regulation of sexuality through rape law occurs in the perception of the complaining witness at the rape trial. Building on the idea that reality is socially constructed in part through ideologically informed images of "men" and "women," feminist legal work has emphasized the ways that perceptions of the credibility of witnesses, for example, are mediated by dominant narratives about the ways that men and women "are." Within this framework, the vast disparity between male and female characterizations reflects a gendered zero-sum equation of credibility and power. The routine focus on the victim's sexual history functions to cast the complainant in one of several roles, including the whore, the tease, the vengeful liar, the mentally or emotionally unstable, or, in a few instances, the madonna. Once these ideologically informed character assignments are made, "the story" tells itself, usually supplanting the woman's account of what transpired between the complainant and the accused with a fiction of villainous female intentionality that misleads and entraps the "innocent" or unsuspecting male in his performance of prescribed sexual behavior. Such displacing narratives are overwhelmingly directed toward interrogating and discrediting the woman's character on behalf of maintaining a considerable range of sexual prerogatives for men. Even the legal definitions of the crime of rape itself are inscribed with male visions of the sexual sphere—the focus on penetration, the definitions of consent (with the once-conventional requirement of "utmost resistance"),[2] the images of female provocation and spiteful false accusation, and the links between desirability, purity, chastity, and value.[3]

The feminist narrative of the rape trial did in many ways account for the dynamics that Anita Hill put into play. For example, a good deal of the hearings was allegedly devoted to determining the credibility of the parties. Anita Hill's subordination through the notion of credibility is revealed in the relatively wide range of narratives that Thomas's defenders could invoke by simply describing events and impressions that had little to do with what transpired between Hill and Thomas in private. For example, the conversation that Anita Hill allegedly had with John Doggett was deemed relevant within a narrative that presented Hill

as an undesirable woman who constructed relationships with men who rejected her. Testimony that she was aloof, ambitious, and hard to get along with was relevant within a narrative that presented her as calculating and careerist. The continuous focus on failure to resign after the harassment began fit into a narrative that presented her as a woman who did not meet the utmost-resistance standard because she was apparently unwilling to exchange her career for her "honor"; she was thus unworthy to make the claim.

Yet there were many narratives that could have been told about Thomas that bore on his credibility. For example, his quite startling shift in philosophy during the eighties and his subsequent "confirmation conversion" could have been understood as bearing on his reputation for truthfulness;[4] his derogatory public references to his sister could be seen as further evidence of his willingness to bend the truth;[5] his participation in an administrative position paper recommending reduced enforcement of sexual harassment could have been interpreted as suggesting a dismissive attitude toward the problem of sexual harassment. Moreover, the testimony of Angela Wright and two other corroborating witnesses could have been used to suggest that there was in fact a pattern of harassment,[6] and most obviously, evidence relating to his consumption of pornography could have been used to suggest a source for the elusive Long Dong Silver. That none of these narratives were seriously pursued while countless narratives about Anita Hill were—though they were arguably less relevant—demonstrates how the interpretive structures we use to reconstruct events are thoroughly shaped by gender power.

II. Race and Chastity: The Limitations of the Feminist Paradigm

Feminist discourse speaks to the particular way in which Anita Hill was disempowered through the very structuring of the inquiry, yet it could account for only part of the context within which Anita Hill acted. The particular intersectional identity of Hill, as both a woman and an African American, lent dimensions to her ideological placement in the economy of American culture that could not be translated through the dominant feminist analysis.[7] Again using the parallel between rape and sexual harassment, these race-specific aspects of black women's experiences are accessible.

Rape and other sexual abuses in the work context, now termed sexual harassment, have been a condition of black women's work life for centuries. Forced sexual access to black women was of course institutionalized in slavery and was central to its reproduction. During the period when the domination of white women was justified and reinforced by the nineteenth-century separate-spheres ideology, the few privileges of separate spheres were not available to black women at all. Instead, the subordination of African-American women recognized few boundaries between public and private life. Rape and other sexual abuses were justified by myths that black women were sexually voracious, that they were sexually indiscriminate, and that they readily copulated with animals, most frequently imagined to be apes and monkeys. Indeed, their very anatomy was objectified. Patricia Hill Collins notes that the abuse and mutilation that these myths inspired are memorialized to this day in a Paris museum where the buttocks and genitalia of Sara Bartmann, the so-called Hottentot Venus, remain on display.[8]

The stereotypes and myths that justified the sexual abuse of black women in slavery continue to be played out in current society. They are apparent in the experiences of women who are abused on their jobs and in the experiences of black women elsewhere in society. For example, in many of the sexual-harassment cases involving African-American women, the incidents they report often represent a merging of racist myths with the victims' vulnerability as women. Black female plaintiffs tell stories of insults and slurs that often go to the core of black women's sexual construction. While black women share with white women the experience of being objectified as "cunts" "beavers," or "pieces," for them those insults are many times prefaced with "black" or "nigger" or "jungle." Perhaps this racialization of sexual harassment explains why black women are disproportionately represented in sexual-harassment cases. Racism may well provide the clarity to see that sexual harassment is neither a flattering gesture nor a misguided social overture but an act of intentional discrimination that is insulting, threatening, and debilitating.

Pervasive myths and stereotypes about black women not only shape the kinds of harassment that black women experience but also influence whether black women's stories are likely to be believed. Historically, a black woman's word was not taken as truth; our own legal system once drew a connection—as a matter of law—between lack of chastity and lack of veracity. In other words, a woman who was likely to have sex could not be trusted to tell the truth. Because black women were not expected to be chaste, they were likewise considered less likely to tell the truth. Thus, judges were known to instruct juries to take a black

woman's word with a grain of salt. One judge admonished jurors not to apply the ordinary presumption of chastity to black women, for if they were to do so, they "would be blinding themselves to actual conditions."[9] In 1971 a judge was quoted as saying, "Within the Negro community, you really have to redefine rape. You never know about them." Lest it be believed that such doubts have been banished to the past, a very recent study of jurors in rape trials revealed that black women's integrity is still very deeply questioned by many people in society. One juror, explaining why a black rape victim was discredited by the jury, stated, "You can't believe everything they say. They're known to exaggerate the truth."[10]

Even where the facts of our stories are believed, myths and stereotypes about black women also influence whether the insult and injury we have experienced is relevant or important. One study concluded, for example, that men who assault black women are the least likely to receive jail time; when they do, the average sentence given to black women's assailants is two years; the average for white women's assailants is ten years. Again, attitudes of jurors seem to reflect a common belief that black women are different from white women and that sexual aggression directed toward them is less objectionable. In a case involving the rape of a black preteen, one juror argued for acquittal on the grounds that a girl her age from "that neighborhood . . . probably wasn't a virgin anyway."

These responses are not exceptional, as illustrated by the societal response to the victimization of Carol Stuart, the Boston woman whose husband murdered her and then fingered a black male. It would strain credibility to say that the Boston police would have undertaken a door-to-door

search of any community had Carol Stuart and her fetus been black, or, on a similar note, that Donald Trump would have taken out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty had that investment banker raped in Central Park been a black service worker. Surely the black woman who was gang-raped during that same week, whose pelvis and ankles were shattered when she was thrown down an elevator shaft and left to die, along with the twenty-eight other women who were raped that week and received no outpouring of public concern, would find it impossible to deny that society views the victimization of some women as being less important than that of others.

Black women experience much of the sexual aggression that the feminist movement has articulated but in a form that represents simultaneously their subordinate racial status. While the fallen-woman imagery that white feminists identify does represent much of black women's experience of gender domination, given their race, black women have in a sense always been within the fallen-woman category. For black women the issue is not the precariousness of holding on to the protection that the madonna image provides or the manner in which the madonna image works to regulate and thereby constrain black women's sexuality. Instead, it is the denial of the presumption of "madonna-hood" that shapes responses to black women's sexual victimization.

White feminists have been reluctant to incorporate race into their narratives about gender, sex, and power. Their unwillingness to speak to the race-specific dimensions of black women's sexual disempowerment was compounded by their simultaneous failure to understand the ways that

race may have contributed to Anita Hill's silence. Their attempt to explain why she remained silent spoke primarily to her career interests. Yet the other reasons why many black women have been reluctant to reveal experiences of sexual abuse—particularly by African-American men—remained unexamined. In fact, many black women fear that their stories might be used to reinforce stereotypes of black men as sexually threatening. Others who may not share this particular concern may nevertheless remain silent fearing ostracism from those who do. Black women face these kinds of dilemmas throughout their lives; efforts to tell these stories may have shaped perceptions of Anita Hill differently among black women, perhaps providing some impetus for breaking through the race-versus-gender dichotomy. Content to rest their case on a raceless tale of gender subordination, white feminists missed an opportunity to span the chasm between feminism and antiracism. Indeed, feminists actually helped maintain the chasm by endorsing the framing of the event as a race versus a gender issue. In the absence of narratives linking race and gender, the prevailing narrative structures continued to organize the Hill and Thomas controversy as either a story about the harassment of a white woman or a story of the harassment of a black man. Identification by race or gender seemed to be an either/or proposition, and when it is experienced in that manner, black people, both men and women, have traditionally chosen race solidarity. Indeed, white feminist acquiescence to the either/or frame worked directly to Thomas's advantage: with Hill thus cast as simply a de-raced—that is, white—woman, Thomas was positioned to claim that he was the victim of racial discrimination with Hill as the perpetrator. However, that

many black people associated Hill more than Thomas with the white world is not solely based on the manner in which feminist discourse is perceived as white. As discussed below, the widespread embrace of Thomas is also attributable to the patriarchal way that racial solidarity has been defined within the black community.

III. Anita Hill as Villian: The Lynching Trope

One of the most stunning moments in the history of American cultural drama occurred when Clarence Thomas angrily denounced the hearings as a "high-tech lynching." Thomas's move to drape himself in a history of black male repression was particularly effective in the all-white male Senate, whose members could not muster the moral authority to challenge Thomas's sensationalist characterization. Not only was Thomas suddenly transformed into a victim of racial discrimination, but Anita Hill was further erased as a black woman. Her racial identity became irrelevant in explaining or understanding her position, while Thomas's play on the lynching metaphor racially empowered him. Of course, the success of this particular reading was not inevitable; there are several competing narratives that could conceivably have countered Thomas's move. Chief among them was the possibility of pointing out that allegations relating to the sexual abuse of black women have had nothing to do with the history of lynching, a tradition based upon white hysteria regarding black male access to white women. Black women's relationship to the lynch mob was not as a perpetrator but as one of its victims, either through their own lynching or the lynching of loved ones. Moreover, one might have plausibly predicted that, given Thomas's persistent denunciation of any effort to

link the history of racism to ongoing racial inequalities, the American public would have scornfully characterized this play as a last-ditch effort to pull his troubled nomination out of the fire. African Americans in particular might have easily rejected Thomas's bid for racial solidarity by concluding that a man who has adamantly insisted that blacks be judged on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin should not be supported when he deploys the color of his skin as a defense to judgments of his character. Yet the race play was amazingly successful; Thomas's approval ratings in the black community skyrocketed from 54 percent to nearly 80 percent immediately following his performance. Indeed, it was probably his solid support in the black community, particularly in the South, that clinched the seat on the Court. Implicit in this response was a rejection, at times frighteningly explicit, of Anita Hill.

The deification of Thomas and the vilification of Anita Hill were prefigured by practices within the black community that have long subordinated gender domination to the struggle against racism. In the process the particular experiences of black men have often come to represent the racial domination of the entire community, as is demonstrated by the symbolic currency of the lynching metaphor and the marginalization of representations of black female domination. Cases involving sexual accusations against black men have stood as hallmarks of racial injustice; Emmett Till, the Scottsboro boys, and others wrongly accused are powerful symbolic figures in our struggle for racial equality. Black women have also experienced sexualized racial violence; the frequent and unpunished rape and mutilation of black women by white men is a manifestation of racial

domination. Yet the names and faces of black women whose bodies also bore the scars of racial oppression are lost to history. To the limited extent that sexual victimization of black women is symbolically represented within our collective memory, it is as tragic characters whose vulnerability illustrates the racist emasculation of black men. The marginalization of black female narratives of racism and sexuality thus worked directly to Thomas's advantage by providing him with the ready means to galvanize the black community on his behalf. Thomas's angry denunciations of Hill's allegations as a "high-tech lynching" invoked powerful images linking him to a concrete history that resonated deeply within most African Americans. Hill, had she been so inclined, could have invoked only vague and hazy recollections in the African-American memory, half-digested experiences of black female sexual abuse that could not withstand the totalizing power of the lynching metaphor.

The discourse of racial liberation, traditionally built around the claim of unequal treatment of black and white people, is of course relevant to the Thomas-Hill conflict, but only partially. In one sense the racial narrative of differential treatment based on race partly comprehends the situation that Hill was in. It seems relatively clear that had Hill been white she would have been read differently by most Americans; as a black female, she had to overcome not only the burdens that feminists have so well articulated in the rape-trial trope but the additional obstacles of race. But, like the dominant feminist narrative, it is again only partial; the abstract description of differential subordination based on skin color is crystallized into narrative tropes that

translate racial inequality into the terms of inequality between men.

The relative potency of male-centered images of sexual racism over female-centered ones is manifested in the contemporary marginalization of black female sexual abuse within black political discourse. Dominant narratives representing the intersections of racism and sexual violence continue to focus on the way that black men accused of raping white women are disproportionately punished relative to black-on-black or white-on-white rape. Within traditional antiracist formulations, this disproportionality has been characterized as racial discrimination against black men. Yet the pattern of punishing black men accused of raping white women more harshly than those accused of raping black women is just as surely an illustration of discrimination against black women. Indeed, some studies suggest that the race of the victim rather than the race of the defendant is the most salient factor determining the disposition of men convicted of rape. Clearly, black women are victims of a racial hierarchy that subordinates their experiences of sexual abuse to those of white women. Yet this intersectional oppression is rarely addressed in antiracist discourses in part because traditional readings of racism continue to center on power differentials between men. Consequently, there is relatively little emphasis on how racism contributes to the victimization of black women both inside and outside the criminal-justice system. The rape of black women has sometimes found its way to the center of antiracist politics, particularly when the rapist is white. But the more common experience of intraracial rape is often disregarded within antiracist politi-

cal discourses, perhaps as a consequence of the view that politicizing such rapes conflicts on some level with efforts to eradicate the prevailing stereotype of the black male rapist. While racism may help explain why white victims are more likely to see their assailants punished than are black victims, one must look to gender power within the black community in order to understand why this persistent devaluation of black women is marginalized within the prevailing conceptions of racism.

Intraracial rape and other abusive practices have not been fully addressed within the African-American community in part because African Americans have been reluctant to expose any internal conflict that might reflect negatively on the black community. Although abiding by this "code of silence" is experienced by African Americans as a self-imposed gesture of racial solidarity, the maintenance of silence also has coercive dimensions. Coercion becomes most visible when someone—male or female—breaks the code of silence. Elements of this coercive dimension of gender silence is illustrated in part by the coverage of the hearings in the black press. In many such accounts Hill was portrayed as a traitor for coming forward with her story. Many commentators were less interested in exploring whether the allegations were true than in speculating why Hill would compromise the upward mobility of a black man and embarrass the African-American community. Anger and resentment toward Hill was reflected in opinions of commentators traversing the political spectrum within black political discourses. Liberal, centrist, and conservative opinion seemed to accept a view of Hill as disloyal and even treasonous.[11] One columnist, a teacher, reported—without criticism—that one of her third-grade

students advocated that Hill be taken out and shot. The theme of treachery was also apparent in a column authored by psychologists Nathan and Julia Hare. In an article titled "The Many Faces of Anita Faye Hill," they linked Hill to other black women who had in some way violated the code by linking gender issues to black women. Along with the almost routine vilification of Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Michelle Wallace was also criticism of Congresswoman Maxine Waters and Faye Wattleton for their prochoice activities and of Margaret Bush Wilson, chair of the NAACP, for opposing Thomas's nomination on the basis of his antiaffirmative-action stand despite the fact that "white women benefit more from affirmative action than Blacks." The Hares ended their piece with a remarkably candid warning to other "Anita Hills" in the making: "We'll be watching you."

The rhetorical deployment of race-based themes to ostracize Anita Hill as an outlaw in the black community received an unexpected boost from noted Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson in a widely circulated opinion piece that appeared in the *New York Times*.[13] While many critics who lambasted Hill for voicing her complaints shied away from offering a direct defense of the behavior of which she complained, Patterson deployed race to normatively embrace such behavior and to ostracize Anita Hill for having been offended by it at all. Themes of treachery and betrayal, so central in Hill's indictment for breaking the code of silence, reemerged as disingenuity and inauthenticity under Patterson's indictment of Hill for acting white. Setting forth what the preconversion Thomas might have pejoratively labeled an affirmative-action defense to sexual harassment, Patterson argued that Thomas's sexual taunt-

ing of Professor Hill was defensible as a "down-home style of courting," one that black women are accustomed to and apparently flattered by. According to Patterson, even if Thomas did say the things Anita Hill claimed he said, not only must Thomas's behavior be weighed against a different racial standard, but Thomas's identity as a black man must be taken into account in determining whether he was justified in perjuring himself. Patterson concludes that in this case perjury was a justifiable means toward winning a seat on the highest court of the land because white America could never understand that such sexual repartee was in fact common among black men and women.

Patterson's text warrants extensive analysis because it articulates and exemplifies the underlying ways in which certain notions of race and culture function to maintain patriarchy and deny or legitimize gender practices that subordinate the interests of black women. Patterson's argument basically functions as a cultural defense of the harassment Hill complained about. Similar defenses have been articulated in various forms to justify other misogynistic or patriarchal practices perpetuated by some black men. Indeed, were the thesis not so readily available in the rhetorical discourse within the black community, one might follow Senator Hatch's allegation that Hill found Long Dong Silver in a court case and wonder whether Patterson's defense of Thomas was found in the case of *California* v. *Jacinto Rhines*.[14] Mr. Rhines, a black man, appealed his conviction for raping two black women, arguing that his conviction should be overturned because the trial court failed to take into account cultural differences between blacks and whites. This failure, he claimed, transformed an ordinary consensual encounter into an actionable rape.

According to Rhines, the victim implicitly consented to having intercourse with him when she agreed to accompany him to his apartment. Rhines also argued that the victim was unreasonable in feeling threatened and coerced by his behavior. Black people are often quite animated and talk loudly to each other all the time, he contended. Because the social meaning of the event in the black community differed dramatically from the way whites would read the event, Rhines concluded that he was wrongly convicted. This "cultural defense," trading on familiar stereotypes of black women as hardier than white women, and more accustomed to aggressive, gritty, even violent sex, essentially amounted to a claim that the complainant was not really a rape victim because she was black.

What caused the downfall of Rhines's argument was that he was unable to explain why the "victims" were apparently unaware of these cultural codes. Whether unreasonable or not, if the women were frightened, the sexual intercourse that occurred was coerced. The court was not only unconvinced that race had any bearing on a woman's reaction to coercion; it also deemed Rhino's argument an "inexcusable slur" designed to "excuse his own conduct by demeaning females of the Black race."

For Rhines's argument to have worked, he would have had to convince the court that the cultural practice he identified was so pervasive that the victim's claims of fear and nonconsent were implausible. In effect, Rhines had to convince the court that the black woman should be held to a different standard of victimhood because she was black. Patterson's argument picks up where Rhines's argument failed. Through labeling Hill's reaction to Thomas's "flirtations" disingenuous, Patterson implies that either

Hill was not, in fact, emotionally injured by Thomas's barrage of sexual innuendo or that if she was, she was influenced to reinterpret her experience through the lens of middle-class white feminism. Indeed, he suggests that the harassment may have actually served to affirm their common origins. This pattern of "bonding" is apparently so readily acceptable that any black woman who is offended or injured by it must be acting on a white feminist impulse rather than a culturally grounded black female sensibility.

Patterson has subsequently defended his argument as an attempt to counter the failure of white feminists to comprehend the many ways that gender issues differ across race and class lines.[15] There should be, of course, little question that sexism often manifests itself in varying ways within racial contexts. The complexities of racism present black women with many issues that are unfamiliar to white feminists. Yet one of the thorniest issues that black women must confront is represented by Patterson's own descent into cultural relativism. Patterson subtly transformed the quite perceptive claim that black women often have different issues with black men than white women do with white men into a claim that sexual harassment as described in the testimony of Anita Hill is not one of them. He seemed to ground this assertion on a claim that black women have played along with and apparently enjoyed this "sexual repartee." Thus, like Rhines, he argued that attempts to sanction this behavior as abusive or offensive to black women are grounded in a white feminist misreading of black cultural practices.

There are a number of reasons why Patterson's analysis is off the mark in explaining the particularities of black

women's sexual subordination, yet it succeeds wonderfully as a discursive illustration of it. Patterson's argument initially rests on a failure to draw any distinction between sexual practices that occur privately and those that occur within the work environment. More fundamentally, the argument reflects a failure to understand the power dynamics that shape those sexual practices in the first place. His argument thus amounts to an uncritical acceptance of sexual practices that he observes in some social settings, an assumption that these practices are characteristic of the whole, and a use of these practices as a normative base to discredit black women who claim to be offended and injured by them.

Patterson's misunderstanding of the nature of sexual harassment is exemplified by his failure to take into account the particular consequences of sexualizing relationships in a highly stratified work environment. In defending Thomas's alleged banter by claiming that such behavior is typical among black men and black women, Patterson constructs the relationship between black men and women as essentially personal and self-contained, no matter what the context. Thus, the rules that prevail in the private social world dictate the terms and conditions of interaction in the more public work world. Setting aside for the moment the power dynamics that shape sexual repartee elsewhere, Patterson overlooks the fact that the highly stratified workplace so thoroughly raises the stakes for black women that engaging in this sexual competition, however skilled at or familiar with the "game" they might be, is a dangerously risky proposition. In a work context, black women are not dealing with a man who, when rebuffed or bested by a woman, will simply move on. Often they are dealing with

a supervisor who can wield his superior institutional power over them either to impose sanctions for their response or to pressure them to compromise their sexual autonomy. Patterson's failure to understand these workplace consequences of sexual harassment is actually consistent with the responses of federal judges who initially refused to see sexual harassment as anything other than private sexual banter that routinely occurs between men and women. Because these practices are quite common throughout society, judges saw them as normative and indeed essential to relations between men and women. Women plaintiffs, however, eventually succeeded in forcing courts to recognize that regardless of the currency of sexual game-playing elsewhere, the perpetuation of these practices in the workplace significantly contributes to women's subordination in the work force.

Black and white women thus share the burden of overcoming assumptions that sexual harassment in the workplace is essentially a "private" issue. Yet race does shape the problem somewhat differently for black women. The racial specificity is grounded in the fact that there is a certain connection between black men and black women born from a common social history of racial exclusion. Often there is a sense of camaraderie between African Americans, a "we're in this together" sensibility. I call this a zone of familiarity, one that creates expectations of support and mutuality that are essential to survival in a work world that is in some ways alien. In fact, this camaraderie is based on a belief that ultimately came to bear on Thomas's behalf—a belief that the interests of African Americans as a whole are advanced by efforts to increase the number of successful and well-placed blacks. However, this zone of

familiarity can sometimes be seen as one of privileged sexual access as well. Consequently, one of the workplace dilemmas faced by black women is trying to negotiate between overlapping expectations in this zone, to maintain much-needed relationships but to avoid unwanted intimacy. This camaraderie and the notions of a shared fate make many black women reluctant to complain about or even to decisively reject the harasser. No doubt this silence contributes to some degree of confusion as to exactly where the boundaries between desired camaraderie and unwanted intimacy exist. This confusion, however, does not render sexual harassment a nonissue. Quite the contrary: claims similar to those made by Patterson contribute to the problem by reinforcing attitudes that feminist critiques of sexuality and power are inapplicable to the sexual dynamic between black men and women. This failure to confront and debate the terms of sex and power allows men to continually dismiss the possibility that their actions or advances might be unwelcome.

Even if we acknowledge that confusion about boundaries might sometimes contribute to harassment, this possibility does little to account for occasions when black men intentionally use and abuse power over black women. Indeed, it was this misuse of power that was consistently misinterpreted or intentionally mischaracterized during the hearings. Ironically, Patterson's characterization of Thomas's alleged behavior as "down-home courting" recalls Hatch's disbelief that any man who wanted to date a women would use such an offensive approach. Although Patterson, of course, seems to be saying "Yes, he would, if they were black" while Hatch maintains that such a man would be a pervert, they are actually in agreement that

sexual harassment is really about a miscommunicated negotiation over dating. Yet the kind of sexual harassment that women find threatening and harmful is seldom about dating but is, instead, often an expression of hostility or an attempt to control. All women have probably experienced abusive, sexually degrading comments that are almost routinely hurled our way when we initially decline or ignore a solicitation from strangers. Sexual harassment is often no different, particularly in contexts where the harasser believes for whatever reason that the woman needs to be "loosened up," "brought down to size," or "taught a lesson."

Patterson's defense of the kind of behavior Hill described remains troubling even outside a formally stratified work context. Patterson's argument takes as a given the sexual repartee that he believes is simply endemic to the black community "down home." Since he has observed black women responding to such sexual verbal gestures by putting men in their place, he contends that it was somehow "out-of-character" and consequently disingenuous for a black woman to claim that she was repulsed and injured by it. Moreover, such verbal gestures are not only typical but somewhat desirable as down-home courting. Of course, Patterson's failure to specify where "down home" is (it later turns out to be working-class Jamaica) gives uninformed readers the impression that all African Americans are familiar with, participate in, and enjoy this "Rabelaisian humor." The fact that many black people—African-American and Afro-Caribbean alike—do not participate in this "down-home" style is actually beside the point. The more troubling issue is how his attempt to defend this mode of sexual repartee by focusing on black

women's participation in it so completely overlooks the way in which this sexual discourse reflects a differential power relationship between men and women.

Patterson assumes that simply because black women have responded to such behavior by displacing aggressive sexual overtures onto a plane of humor and wit, they are neither offended nor threatened by it, and that somehow this "style" is defensible as cultural. Yet merely because black women have developed this particular style of self-defense does not mean that they are not defending themselves against unwanted sexual gestures. A description of the particular way in which women participate and respond to this sexual repartee does not suffice as an analysis of its power dimensions or as a reasonable defense of its subordinating characteristics. Patterson's claims do succeed in centering white women's patterns of interactions by implying that since black women respond differently to verbal aggression, then what they experience is not sexual harassment. Yet women of all races, classes, and cultures no doubt respond in different ways, ways that probably reflect to some degree their particular sociocultural position. White middle-class women have a repertoire of responses to deflect verbal aggression as do working-class black women and middle-class black women, and these responses are likely to differ. The humor or verbal competition that typifies the way some black women react to harassment probably results from the dearth of options available to nonelite black women within a society that has demonstrated manifest disregard for their sexual integrity. After all, to what authority can women who have been consistently represented as sexually available appeal? Since they have little access to any rhetorical or social power

from which to create a sphere of sexual autonomy, it is not surprising that some women have learned to displace the aggression onto a humorous, discursive plane. The paradox of Patterson's position is that, given the greater exposure of black women to various forms of sexual aggression, many have developed defense mechanisms that Patterson then points to, in effect to confirm the racist stereotypes that black women are tougher than white women and thus not injured by the same practices that would injure white women. Black women's historical lack of protection becomes a basis for saying no protection is necessary.

Finally, it may be that Patterson's argument, while intellectually and politically indefensible, might in fact provide a clue into how someone like Clarence Thomas might differentiate between women. The plausibility of the *People* magazine image of Thomas and his wife together reading the Bible in their home as a counterimage to Hill's charges made sense for a public that would assume that he would in fact treat all women the same.[16] In other words, sexual harassment is read as only implicating a deraced notion of gender power. But like many men, black and white, Patterson perpetuates images that give a ready rationale for different treatment of black and white women. White women could be pure, madonna-like figures needing vigilant protection, but black women can take care of themselves—indeed, they even implicitly consent to aggression by participating in a cultural repartee.

The overall strategy of Patterson's defense seems to rest on an assumption that merely identifying the culturally specific dimensions of some practice or dynamic constitutes a normative shield against any criticism of it. But mere descriptions of the practices do little to engage the

conditions of power that created them. This point is not unfamiliar to African-American scholars and activists. Indeed, there was a time when "cultural defense" arguments were made against those who opposed the racial caste system that prevailed in the South. Many white community leaders argued that patterns of interaction between blacks and whites were maintained by mutual consent and that local blacks were content in their subordinate roles. Having portrayed blacks as willing participants in the racial regime, defenders of the southern way of life were able to claim that demands for equality were imposed from without by northern agitators who did not share the cultural mores of the South.

African Americans as a group refused to allow these arguments to deter their quest for equality. Focusing on the coercive conditions under which consent had been maintained and enforced, critics revealed the way that white supremacy was manifest in relationships not only between dominant whites and subordinate blacks but among blacks as well. Most important, critics exposed the role of coercion in creating these "voluntary" racial practices. This critique included a full accounting of the way that dissent and other counterhegemonic practices were suppressed.

Drawing on this history, the deployment of the cultural defense where gender subordination is alleged requires that we examine not only the way that cultural practices among African-American men and women are an expression of particular power arrangements but also the different means by which these practices are maintained and legitimated. A critical dimension of this examination involves acknowledging the ways that African-American women have contributed to the maintenance of sexist and debilitating

gender practices. For example, the Anita Hill controversy and the commentary it has spawned have shed light on how women's own participation in this conspiracy of silence has legitimated sexism within our community. Our failure to break ranks on the issue of misogyny permits writers like Patterson to argue not only that these behaviors are harmless but that they function to affirm our cultural affinity. Our historical silence functions in much the same way that Hill's silence did: we have played along all this time; thus it is far too late in the game for black women to voice offense.

Of course, not all black women have silently acquiesced in sexism and misogyny within the African-American community. Indeed, many writers, activists, and other women have voiced their opposition and paid the price: they have been ostracized and branded as either man-haters or pawns of white feminists, two of the more predictable modes of disciplining and discrediting black feminists. Patterson's argument is of course a model illustration of the latter mode.

In the ongoing debates over black feminism, some critics argue that their objective is not to suppress discussions of gender power within the black community but to stem the tide of negative black stereotypes. Yet even this principle, when examined, reveals a pattern of criticism that seems to suggest that the concern over black male stereotypes functions in a specifically gendered way. For example, the black community has sometimes been embroiled in a debate over political and literary representations of black women's experiences of sexism and misogyny.[17] Yet there is a remarkable willingness to accept, virtually without debate, similar images of black men when these images are valorized and sometimes politicized. Ranging from political tracts such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* to movies such as *Boyz 'N the Hood* to rap lyrics such as those of NWA, the Geto Boys, and 2 Live Crew, black men have been depicted in sexist and often violently misogynistic terms. In these "scripts" black women serve simply as the objects of masculine rage or sexuality. Yet when the objects take on the voice and the same male images are re-presented through the eyes of the newly empowered subjects, accusations fly. This suggests that it is not the perpetuation of the images themselves that enrages these writers' harshest critics but rather the implicit critique and complaint that is being lodged against patriarchy in the black community. Take, for example, the aforementioned and highly acclaimed movie *Boyz 'N the Hood*. Had the story been told through the perspective of any of the women in the movie, *Boyz* probably would have been picketed as yet another example of black feminist male-bashing.

The framing of these conflicts, along with Patterson's defense of Clarence Thomas, reveals how politics and culture are frequently deployed to suppress or justify many of the troubling manifestations of patriarchial power within the black community. Of course, cultural integrity and political solidarity are important values in the black community. Yet the ways in which these values have functioned to reinscribe gender power must constantly be interrogated. That black people across a political and class spectrum were willing to condemn Anita Hill for breaking ranks is a telling testament to how deep gender conflicts are tightly contained by the expectation of racial solidarity. But more specifically it is a testament to the greater degree to which differences over gender are suppressed as compared

with other political differences. The vilification of Anita Hill and the embracing of Clarence Thomas reveal that a black woman breaking ranks to complain of sexual harassment is seen by many African-Americans as a much greater threat to our group interests than a black man who breaks ranks over race policy. This double standard is apparent in Patterson's rush to defend Thomas's behavior and to assail Professor Hill. Stumbling over the central contradiction in his own argument, Patterson cites as a benefit of the hearings the fact that African Americans don't all think alike and are instead a diverse aggregate of thirty million people "with class differences, subcultural and regional resources, strengths, flaws and ideologies." Unfortunately, Patterson cannot see that African-American women might also differ in their willingness to tolerate a particular "sexual style," that class and subcultural differences might as readily explain why Professor Hill and other black women might take offense at this "down-home courting style" just as these same differences might explain why Thomas and many of his associates reject affirmative action. Yet, in Patterson's world, Anita Hill and other black women are no longer black, while Thomas and other critics of group-based race policies are simply diverse. At the very least, Professor Patterson's celebration of diversity should be extended to allow women like Anita Hill the same independence and integrity that he so enthusiastically grants to neoconservatives like Clarence Thomas.

IV. Political Implications

Now, over a year after one of the most extraordinary public spectacles involving race and gender in this country's history, we are left asking what have we learned.

Among the most painful of the lessons to be drawn from the Thomas-Hill affair is that feminism must be recast in order to reach women who do not see gender as relevant to an understanding of their own disempowerment. In an attempt to recast the face of feminism, women organizers have to begin to apply gender analysis to problems that might initially appear to be shaped primarily by exclusively racial or class factors. Nonwhite and working-class women, if they are ever to identify with the organized women's movement, must see their own diverse experiences reflected in the practice and policy statements of these predominantly white middle-class groups.

The confirmation of Clarence Thomas, one of the most conservative voices to be added to the Court in recent memory, carries a sobering message for the African-American community as well. As he begins to make his mark upon the lives of African Americans, we must acknowledge that his successful nomination is due in no small measure to the support he received from black Americans.[18] On this account, it is clear that we still operate under a reflexive vision of racial solidarity that is problematic on two fronts. First, our failure to readily criticize African Americans, based on a belief that our interests are served whenever a black rises through the ranks of power, will increasingly be used to undermine and dismantle policies that have been responsible for the moderate successes that group politics have brought about. Already, African-American individuals have played key roles in attacking minority scholarships, cutting back on available remedies for civil rights injuries, and lifting sanctions against South Africa. While group-based notions of solidarity insulate these people from serious criticism and scrutiny, it is pre-

cisely their willingness to pursue a ruthlessly individualist agenda that renders this strategy effective and ultimately profitable. Yet the Thomas-Hill story is about more than the political ways that racial solidarity must be critically examined. It is also about the way that our failure to address gender power within our community created the conditions under which an ultimately self-destructive political reaction took place. If we are not to continue to be victimized by such understandable but still counterproductive responses, we must achieve a more mature and purposeful vision of the complex ways in which power is allocated and withheld in contemporary American politics. In particular, we must acknowledge the central role that black women's stories play in our coming to grips with how public power is manipulated. If black women continue to be silenced and their stories ignored, we are doomed to have but a limited grasp of the full range of problems we currently face. The empowerment of black women constitutes therefore the empowerment of our entire community.

NOTES

1. See Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Gender in Antidiscrimination Law, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," 1989 *Chicago Legal Forum* 139.
2. As recently as 1978, Wigmore's Treatise on Evidence, Section 62, provided that where the nonconsent of a rape complainant is a material element in a rape case, "the character of a woman for chastity is of considerable probative value in judging of the likelihood of that consent." Wigmore went on to say that "the same doctrine should apply . . . in a charge of mere assault with intent to commit rape or of indecent assault, or the like, not because it is logically relevant where consent is not in issues, but because a certain type of feminine character predisposes to imaginary or false charges of this sort." Some states continue to admit such evidence in certain instances.
3. Historically, a woman was required to fight off her attacker until her resistance was overcome. If a woman failed to struggle, or if she gave in before she was subdued, the conclusion drawn was that she was not raped. See Susan Estrich, "Real Rape," 95 *Yale Law Journal* 1087, 1122 (1986): "in effect, the 'utmost resistance' rule required both that the woman resist to the 'utmost' and that such resistance must not have abated during the struggle."
4. See "An Analysis of the Views of Judge Clarence Thomas," NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc., August 13, 1991, pointing out the contradiction between Thomas's pre-1986 speeches and writings and the speeches and writings he produced starting in late 1986. His earlier statements explicitly condemned only three Supreme Court decisions—*Dred Scott, Plessy v. Ferguson,* and a conservative decision. In contrast, the later statements contained "an outburst of denunciations of both the Supreme Court and its civil rights decisions." The

Legal Defense Fund position paper also points out Thomas's shift from praising Justices Black, Douglas, Frankfurter, and Warren to praising Scalia and Bork.

5. Thomas's criticism of his sister as a welfare dependent created an image that contrasted starkly with her actual work history, which included both work-force participation and caring for family members. See Joel Handler, "The Judge and His Sister: Growing Up Black," *New York Times,* July 23, 1991.
6. Wright, a former employee of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission during Thomas's tenure with the commission, is quoted as saying that Judge Thomas pressured her for dates, asked her breast size, and showed up at her apartment uninvited. Peter Applebom, "Common Threads Between the Two Accusing Thomas of Sexual Improprieties," *New York Times,* October 12, 1990.
7. I do not mean to suggest that race is only relevant in the sexual domination of black women. Race is clearly a factor—though a hidden one—in white women's experiences, just as gender also figures in the experiences of black men. However, because white is the default race in feminism and male is the default gender in antiracism, these identity characteristics usually remain unarticulated.
8. Patricia Hill Collins, "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood," *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 168.
9. See Jennifer Wriggins, "Race, Racism and the Law," 6 *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 103 (1983).
10. See Gary LaFree, *Rape and Criminal Justice: The Social Construction of Sexual Assault,* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1991).
11. Hamil R. Harris, "Hill Is Lying, Says EEOC Staffer," *Washington Afro-American,* October 12, 1991, quoting Armstrong Williams, who called Hill "an outrageous liar"; "Betrayal of Friendship," *Bay State Banner,* October 17, 1991, attacking Anita Hill's credibility and stating that the case "demonstrates the vulnerability of all men in important positions to bogus

sexual harassment charges as a power play by ambitious women." And in the white press, many of the black women interviewed expressed little or no sympathy for Hill, ignoring the reality of their own experiences with gender-based abuses of power, and placing the responsibility for avoiding harassment squarely on the shoulders of the victim. See Felicity Barringer, "The Drama as Viewed by Women," *New York Times,* October 18, 1991, A12, documenting women's adverse reactions to Hill: "It's unbelievable that a woman couldn't stop something like that at its inception," said one. Another asked, "Wouldn't you haul off and poke a guy in the mouth if he spoke in that manner?" And still another said had this to say: "You have to make sure you get across that you're a professional. If someone isn't willing to accept that, you make sure you're not in a room alone with him."

12. See Nathan Hare and Julia Hare, "The Many Faces of Anita Hill," in *The Final Call,* the newspaper published by The Nation of Islam under Minister Louis Farrakhan. The headline on the paper in which the Hares' article appeared read "Thomas Survives High-Tech Lynching."
13. Orlando Patterson's "Race, Gender, and Liberal Fallacies" appeared in the *New York Times* on October 20, 1991, the Sunday following Thomas's confirmation.
14. *People v. Jacinto Aniello Rhines,* 131 Cal. App. 3d. 498, May 6, 1982.
15. See "Roundtable: Sexuality in America After Thomas/Hill," *Tikkun,* January/February 1992, p. 25.
16. Virginia Lamp Thomas, "Breaking Silence," *People,* November 11, 1991, p. 111. Virginia Hill tells how she and her husband invited two couples to their home to pray for two to three hours each day. "They brought over prayer tapes, and we would read parts of the Bible," she stated.
17. Mel Watkins, "Sexism, Racism, and Black Women Writers," *New York Times,* June 15, 1986; Donna Britt, "What About the Sisters? With All the Focus on Black Men, Somebody's Getting Left Out," *Washington Post,* February 2, 1992, citing black male objections to Alice Walker's and Ntozake Shange's work, and

questioning where those black male voices are when black male violence is being condoned . . . glamorized, ignored; Susan Howard, "Beware of 'Blacklash,'" *Newsday*, February 12, 1992, arguing that there is a blacklash against black women, and citing the communities' unwillingness to forgive Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange for writing *The Color Purple* and *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* to support this proposition.

18. "In Other Words," *USA Today*, March 7, 1992: "Rookie Justice Clarence Thomas already is leaving his mark on America's legal system. Based on the dissent he wrote in a recent case, it's not just a mark—it's more like a welt. Fortunately, all but one other justice on the high court viewed the actions of a Louisiana prison guard—who shackled and beat a prisoner—as the kind of cruel and unusual punishment that the Eighth Amendment forbids. . . . Those who harbored hopes that Justice Thomas might feel a shred of concern for society's victims got a firm sock in the kisser." In another of his more notable contributions, in *Presley v. Etowah County Commission*, Thomas paid tribute to his southern roots by denying the voting-rights claims of a newly elected black official who was deprived of decision-making authority. Even the Bush administration agreed that the actions violated the Voting Rights Act.

PAULA GIDDINGS

The Last Taboo

The agonizing ordeal of the Clarence Thomas nomination should have taught us a valuable lesson: racial solidarity is not always the same as racial loyalty. This is especially true, it seems to me, in a postsegregation era in which solidarity so often requires suppressing information about any African American of standing regardless of their political views or character flaws. Anita Hill's intervention in the proceedings should have told us that when those views or flaws are also sexist, such solidarity can be especially destructive to the community.

As the messenger for this relatively new idea, Anita Hill earned the antipathy of large segments of the African-American community. More at issue than her truthfulness—or Clarence Thomas's character or politics—was whether she *should* have testified against another black person, especially a black man, who was just a hairsbreadth