

## Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype

Just now I have had a teaching experience with Princeton graduate students, who were reading a lot and thinking hard, that reminds me of the formidability of seeing class and gender, as well as race, in matters African-American. The assignment challenged even thoughtful young people, who had an entire semester in which to work things out. But the Thomas-Hill hearings were entirely different, for few in the audience were graduate students dedicated to making sense of complicated issues. This time the scenario played itself out in the fast-paced medium of television before an audience unaccustomed to thinking about gender and race simultaneously. Because the protagonists of this American theatrical production were black, race stayed in the forefront nearly all the time. Even so, viewers realized, however fuzzily, that something else was going on. The unusual cast of characters made the viewers' task novel

and hard: to weigh the significance of race in an intraracial drama. But the exercise proved too daunting, and stereotype, almost inevitably, became the medium of exchange. Even before the second part of the televised hearings began, Clarence Thomas had shown me that he would portray issues of gender as racial cliché.

As troubled as I was by what happened to the person and the persona of Anita Hill in the hearings, I had begun to have doubts about Clarence Thomas's manipulation of gender issues well before she entered the scene. My own difficulties with Thomas regarding women began when I learned that he had portrayed his sister, Emma Mae Martin, as a deadbeat on welfare. In a speech to Republicans (who practically invented the role of welfare queen), he had made Martin into a stock character in the Republican scenario of racial economics. His point was to contrast her laziness with his hard work and high achievement to prove, I suppose, that any black American with gumption and a willingness to work could succeed. Thus, a woman whom he had presumably known and loved for a lifetime emerged as a one-dimensional welfare cheat, one of the figures whom black women cite as an example of the pernicious power of negative stereotype. For Thomas, it seemed, all the information that needed to be known of his sister compared her to him: she was a failure on welfare and he was a high-ranking official. He left it to others—who were his critics—to describe his sister more completely.

Other people, like Lisa Jones in the *Village Voice*, had more to say about Emma Mae Martin. It turns out that she was only on welfare temporarily and that she was usually a two-job-holding, minimum-wage-earning mother of four. Unable to afford professional help, she had gone on

welfare while she nursed the aunt who had suffered a stroke but who normally kept her children when Martin was at work. Feminists noted that Martin belonged to a mass of American women who were caregivers to the young, the old, and the infirm. She had followed a trajectory common in the experience of poor women, regardless of race; this pattern Clarence Thomas did not acknowledge.

That his life and the life of his sister had differed by virtue of their gender was not included in Clarence Thomas's rendition of contrasting destinies. He seemed not to have appreciated that he was the favored boy-child who was protected and sent to private schools and that she was the girl who stayed behind, married early, and cared for a relative who had fallen ill. If he realized how common his family's decisions had been, he gave no indication of seeing those choices as gendered. His equation balanced one thing only, and that was individual enterprise. Even though as a hospital worker his sister was a symbol of Jesse Jackson's masses of black folk who work every day, her life as a worker counted for naught in Thomas's story. His eagerness to shine on a conservative stage allowed him to obscure the actual circumstances of her life and her finances and to disregard her vulnerabilities as a poor, black woman. If he were ignorant of how very characteristic of poor women's her life's course had been, he would seem to have performed his job heading the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in a perfunctory manner; if he were aware of how often families in need engage in such triage and distorted her situation to satisfy a Republican audience, he is guilty of outright cruelty.

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Clarence Thomas's wielding of stereotype against his sister—a woman whose identity was already overburdened by stereotype—foreshadowed his strategy in the hearings that pitted him against another black woman, both in its heartlessness and its exploitation of racial imagery. Both times he distorted his relative position vis-à-vis a specific black woman, as though lacking a sense of social perspective.

Comparing his sister's failings to his own achievements, he spoke as though the two of them had played with the same advantages and handicaps, as though he had seized his chances while she had unaccountably kicked her own equal opportunities aside. Later, as he confronted Anita Hill, his translation of the power relations of gender were similarly skewed. This time he ultimately portrayed himself as the person at the bottom facing terrible odds. His older adversaries were his favorite cardboard-cutout bogey-people: the (black, male) civil rights establishment and organized (white) feminists who persecuted him for being of independent mind. Squared off against his bogey-people, he saw himself as a symbol of integrity and as an underdog.

Thomas's version of American power dynamics reversed a decade's worth of his own rhetoric, in which he had castigated black civil rights advocates for whining about racist oppression. The haughty dismissal of claims that racism persisted had previously been his stock-in-trade. But once a black woman accused him of abusing his power as a man and as an employer, he quickly slipped into the most familiar role in the American iconography of race: that of

the victim. Accused of misuse of power, he presented himself as a person with no power at all. It mattered not that the characterization was totally inappropriate, in terms of gender and of race.

In a struggle between himself and a woman of his same race, Thomas executed a deft strategy. He erected a tableau of white-black racism that allowed him to occupy the position of "the race." By reintroducing concepts of white power, Thomas made himself into "the black person" in his story. Then, in the first move of a two-step strategy, he cast Anita Hill into the role of "black-woman-as-traitor-to-the-race."

The black-woman-as-traitor-to-the-race is at least as old as *David Walker's Appeal* of 1829, and the figure has served as a convenient explanation for racial conflict since that time. Although Thomas did not flesh out his accusation, which served his purposes only briefly, it should be remembered that in the tale of the subversion of the interests of the race, the black female traitor—as mother to whites or lover of whites—connives with the white man against the black man. Such themes reappear in *Black Skin, White Masks*, by Frantz Fanon; in *Black Rage*, by William Grier and Price Cobbs; and in *Madheart*, by LeRoi Jones, in which the figure of "the black woman," as "mammy" or as "Jezebel," is subject to loyalties to whites that conflict with her allegiance to the black man. Unable to extricate herself from whites, the black-woman-as-traitor misconstrues her racial interests and betrays black men's aspirations to freedom. Freedom, in this particular instance, meant a seat on the United States Supreme Court.

Although she is well known among African Americans, the black-woman-as-traitor-to-the-race is less familiar to

white Americans and thus is not a useful trope in the television shorthand of race through which Clarence Thomas communicated. Having made Anita Hill into a villain, he proceeded—wittingly or not—to erase her and return to a simpler and more conventional cast. By the end of his story Anita Hill had lost the only role, that of villain, that his use of stereotype had allowed her. She finally disappeared, as he spun out a drama pitting the lone and persecuted figure of Clarence Thomas, the black man, against an army of powerful white assailants. Democratic senators became the lynch mob; Thomas became the innocent lynch victim. As symbol and as actual person, Anita Hill was no longer to be found.

Hill's strategy was different from Thomas's. But had she not stood on the ground of personal integrity and the truth of her own individual experiences, she might have sought to work within the framework of racial typecasting. To do so would have tested the limits of the genres of senatorial testimony and televised hearings, for she would have needed at least a semester to reveal, analyze, and destroy the commonplaces of American racism that Thomas manipulated so effectively. Her task could neither be undertaken, nor completed in sound bites and within a matter of days. Simply to comprehend Hill's identity as a highly educated, ambitious, black female Republican imposed a burden on American audiences, black and white, that they were unable—at least at that very moment—to shoulder. With breathtaking cynicism, Thomas evoked the pitiable image of the victimized black man, and his exploitation of the imagery of race succeeded. Such images, such stereotypes, of black women as well as of black men, bear closer inspection.

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Black people of both sexes have represented the American id for a very long time, a phenomenon rooted in our cultural identities of race and class. The stereotypes are centuries old and have their origins in European typecasting of both the poor and the black, for sex is the main theme associated with poverty and with blackness. Even where race is not at issue, the presence of the poor introduces the subject of sex. William Shakespeare's characters provide a handy reminder across spectra of race, class, and ethnicity: the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* speaks of sex purposefully and unintentionally, so that her every other utterance is characterized as bawdy; Caliban, in *The Tempest*, is a playfully uninhibited savage; and of course, there is Othello the Moor in a tortured saga of desire.

Sexuality, in the sense of the heightened desirability of working-class characters, figures centrally in the diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick, in *My Secret Life*, in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and, homoerotically, in Hermann Hesse's *Demian*. In each case, members of the middle and upper classes seek sexual titillation or fulfillment with lovers of a lower class. Sigmund Freud, describing the complex family dynamics of bourgeois households, spoke of women in domestic service as people of low morals, because they were so likely to become entangled sexually with the men of the families that employed them. More recently, Susan Brownmiller has noted that women who are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence by token of their ethnicity or race—Jews in Europe, Negroes in the United States—are viewed as especially provocative by potential assailants.

Over and over in European imaginations, the poor epitomize unfettered sexuality, and this convention has come to serve in the United States as well. American writing not only echoes the sexualization of the poor (Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets*, Wilbur Cash's *Mind of the South*), but, reflecting a history in which masses of workers were enslaved, also adds the ingredient of race. In American iconography the sexually promiscuous black girl—or more precisely, the yellow girl—represents the mirror image of the white woman on the pedestal. Together, white and black women stand for woman as madonna and as whore.

Today, as in the past, race and class are hopelessly intertwined in the United States. This is so even a generation after the end of legal segregation and the confusion of usages related to race and usages related to class. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, it was the lower classes who were expected to show deference toward the aristocracy by bowing their heads, doffing their hats, tolerating the use of their first names, entering by the service entrance, and, above all, revealing no sign of independent thought. In the era of American segregation these habits became the patterns of racial subordination that all black people, no matter what their class standing, were expected to observe. For most Americans race became and remains the idiom of expression of differences and characteristics of class. Just as slaves were the most exploited of workers, so blacks in the United States have become the sexiest of the American poor.

The imagery of sex in race has not and does not work in identical ways for black women and men, even though

figures of educated black people, whether male or female, are not well enough established for quick recognition on TV, where the Thomas-Hill saga played and where so many American stereotypes are reinforced. Aside from Bill Cosby, there is no handy black character in our national imagination, male or female, who has strayed very far from the working class. And Cosby constitutes less a symbol than an individual phenomenon. If Clarence Thomas could not reach for a stereotypical black man who would be educated and respectable, Anita Hill (had she succumbed to the temptation) could not have done so either. To silence his questioners quickly, Clarence Thomas had to draw on older, better-known formulations of racial victimization, and he had to reach across lines of class and privilege to do so.

Thomas appropriated the figure of the lynch victim despite glaring dissimilarities between himself and the thousands of poor unfortunates who, unprotected by white patrons in the White House or the United States Senate or by the law, perished at the hands of white southern mobs. As though education, status, and connections counted for nothing, Thomas grasped a chain of reference that begins with the stereotypical black-beast-rapist, as depicted in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. As Thomas knew well, however, those associations do not end with the rapist; they extend into meanings that subvert Griffith's brutalized invention.

The black-beast-rapist connects to the black man accused of rape, who, in turn, is only one link in a chain that also casts doubt on the validity of the charge of rape when leveled against black men. Ida B. Wells began to undermine the credibility of the accusation in the 1890s, and the

NAACP and the Communist Party helped to discredit lynching even after trials, as in the case of the eight young black men summarily sentenced to hang in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931. Since that time the presumption (among non-Ku Klux Klansmen, at least) has been that the quintessential lynch victim was, like the Scottsboro boys, a casualty of the miscarriage of justice. To mention the figure of the southern black lynch victim is to cite a man unjustly accused, and this was the meaning that Clarence Thomas summoned. Had the sexualized figure of the black man not evolved past *Birth of a Nation*, he could not have served Thomas's purpose.

Anita Hill, on the other hand, had no comparable tradition of a stereotype that had been recognized, analyzed, and subverted to draw upon. The mammy image is in the process of being reworked, while the welfare queen and the oversexed-black-Jezebel are still unreconstructed. Considering that Hill is a beautiful young woman who was leveling a charge of sexual harassment, adapting herself to stereotype and then reworking the stereotype would not have been a simple matter. (No odder, perhaps, than assimilating the figure of a lynch victim to the person of a nominee for the United States Supreme Court.) Stereotypes of black women remain fairly securely in place, and the public discussion that would examine and dislodge them has only begun to occur around the mammy image. The oversexed-black-Jezebel is more likely than not still taken at face value.

The depiction of the oversexed-black-Jezebel is not so salient in American culture as that of the black-beast-rapist/

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lynch victim, but she has sufficient visibility to haunt black women to this day. This stereotypical black woman not only connotes sex, like the working-class white woman, but unlike the latter, is assumed to be the instigator of sex. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* may have been seduced by a fast-talking city slicker she met on a train, but Rose Johnson, in Gertrude Stein's *As Fine as Melanctha*, positively revels in sexual promiscuity.

Overdetermined by class and by race, the black-woman-as-whore appears nearly as often as black women are to be found in representations of American culture. Mary Chesnut, in her Civil War diary, pities the virtuous plantation mistress surrounded by black prostitutes anxious to seduce white men and boys. The stereotype that averred there were no virginal black women over the age of fourteen was prevalent enough in the 1890s to mobilize black club-women nationally against it. The figure of the oversexed-black-Jezebel has had amazing longevity. She is to be found in movies made in the 1980s and 1990s—*She's Gotta Have It*, *Jungle Fever*, *City of Hope*—in which black female characters are still likely to be shown unclothed, in bed, and in the midst of coitus.

Mammy, welfare cheat, Jezebel, period. These were the roles available to Anita Hill. Hill chose not to make herself into a symbol Americans could recognize, and as a result she seemed to disappear, a fate reserved for black women who are well educated and are thus doubly hard to see. Mammy and Jezebel and the welfare queen may be the most prominent roles for black women in American culture, but even these figures, as limited as is their range, inhabit the shadows of American imagination.

As commentators like Darlene Clark Hine and Patricia

Hill Collins have noted, silence and invisibility are the hallmarks of black women in the imagery of American life. The most common formula for expressing minority status, in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth, is "women and blacks." As the emblematic woman is white and the emblematic black is male, black women generally are not as easy to comprehend symbolically. Barbara Smith, Gloria Hull, and Patricia Bell Scott noted in 1982 that while all the women seem to be white and all the blacks seem to be men, some of us are brave.

Because black women have been harder than men to fit into clichés of race, we often disappear. Few recall that after Bigger Thomas, in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, accidentally killed rich, white Mary Dalton, he committed the brutal, premeditated murder of his girlfriend, the innocent black Bessie. *Native Son* is generally summed up as the story of a racial crime in which a white woman dies and a black man emerges as the victim of society. Two generations later Eldridge Cleaver said in *Soul on Ice* that he raped black women for practice; he was honing his skills before attacking white women, who were for him real women. The poet Audre Lorde remembered and grieved for the twelve black women who were murdered in Boston in the spring of 1979, but their remembrance grows shadowy beside the figure of the Central Park jogger. Who recalls that Joan Little had been sexually assaulted by the man she killed?

Disregarded or forgotten or, when remembered, misconstrued, the symbolic history of black women has not functioned in the same way as the symbolic history of black men. If the reality of the Scottsboro boys and other black men accused of rape showed that the charge was liable to be false and thereby tempered the stereotype, the meaning

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of the history of black women as victims of rape has not yet penetrated the American mind. In the absence of an image equivalent to that of the Scottsboro boys, black women's reputed hypersexuality has not been reappraised. It is as though silence and invisibility had entirely frozen the image of black men at the black-beast-rapist stage. Lacking access to the means of mass communication, black women have not been able to use our history of abuse as a corrective to stereotypes of rampant sexuality.

Since the seventeenth-century beginnings of their forcible importation into what would become the United States, black women have been triply vulnerable to rape and other kinds of violence: as members of a stigmatized race, the subordinate sex, and people who work for others. The history of sexual violence against black women is rooted in slavery, but as bell hooks points out, it did not end there. Despite two centuries' worth of black women's testimony, as exemplified in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and the St. John's University rape case of 1991, our vulnerability to rape has not become a standard item in the list of crimes against the race. When the existence of rape is acknowledged, it is, as often as not, to name a crime of which the black man, rather than she who was raped, is the victim. Unable to protect "his" woman, the black man suffers the loss of his manhood when a female family member is assaulted. The belief persists that black women are always ready for sex and, as a consequence, cannot be raped. Introducing the specter of sex, Hill made herself vulnerable to Virginia Thomas's doubly stereotypical retort: Hill—as both the oversexed black Jezebel anxious for sex and as the rejected, vindictive woman who trumps up a charge of

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sexual harassment—really wanted to sleep with Clarence Thomas. The injury, then, is to him, not to her.

More, finally, is at stake here than winning a competition between black men and black women for the title of ultimate victim as reckoned in the terms of white racism, as tempting as the scenario of black-versus-white tends to be. Anita Hill found no shelter in stereotypes of race not merely because they are too potent and too negative to serve her ends. There was no way for Hill to emerge a hero of the race, because she would not deal in black and white. By indicting the conduct of a black man, Hill revealed the existence of intraracial conflict, which white Americans find incomprehensible and many black Americans guard as a closely held secret of the race. Keeping that secret in the interest of racial unity has silenced black women on the issue of sexual abuse, for our attackers have been black men as well as white, as *The Black Women's Health Book* poignantly reveals. Because discussions of the abuse of black women would not merely implicate whites, black women have been reluctant to press the point. Our silence, in turn, has tended to preserve intact the image of oversexed black Jezebel. Who knows how long Anita Hill would have held her tongue had not circumstances forced her to go public?

As things turned out, in the short run at least, Clarence Thomas and his allies managed once again to "disappear" the black woman and to stage a drama of race. But the gender issue that Anita Hill raised, despite its potential for deep divisiveness, looks toward the future of racial politics in the United States (unless the David Dukes of the world force us back into a terrorized, defensive, androcentric

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unity). Ironically, black conservatism, which is not very hospitable to feminism, initially staked the claim for diversity within the race. Black feminists are enlarging this claim in the name of our history as black women.

Black women, who have traditionally been discounted within the race and degraded in American society, are becoming increasingly impatient with our devaluation. Breaking the silence and testifying about the abuse, black feminists are publishing our history and dissecting the stereotypes that have been used against us. So far, the discussion has not engaged large numbers of Americans, but I trust that Anita Hill will have helped us reach many more. If my experience with earnest and hardworking Princeton graduate students offers any guidance, the process, though ultimately liberating, will prove to be intellectually demanding. We will know we have succeeded in taking a first step when Americans greet the images of the mammy, the welfare queen, and the oversexed-black-Jezebel with the skepticism they turn toward the figure of the lynch victim accused of raping a white woman. Our work, however, cannot end there, for both the black-beast-rapist and the oversexed-black-Jezebel would still survive with enough vigor to dog both our tracks. The next step, which is just as necessary, will free African Americans from sexualized stereotypes that tyrannize us as black men and black women, for black men as well as black women feel their lives are circumscribed by just such stereotypes.