



## Politics & Pleasures in the Nineties

BY Darrell Moore

### Black Popular Culture: A Project By Michele Wallace.

Gina Dent, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press 1992) 373 pp illustrations

*Black Popular Culture* marks a stirring watershed in the ways in which Black intellectuals produce, theorize, and interpret Black culture. The book, edited by Gina Dent, is based on presentations and panel discussions at the "Black Popular Culture" conference held at The Studio Museum in Harlem and the Dia Center for the Arts in December 1991. The conference, conceived and executed by Michele Wallace, brought together 28 distinguished American- and England-based black intellectuals from the academy and art world into the same space for three incredible days. The alchemy created by the mixture of a supportive physical space and the exchanges generated by the presentations of Hazel Carby, Julianne Malveaux, Isaac Julien, Manning Marable, Marlon Riggs, Tricia Rose, and Judith

Wilson (to name a few) resulted in exciting and stimulating discussions that ultimately move the idea of "black studies" toward an historical articulation of the contradictory and complex manifestations of black presence in the diaspora, particularly in the United States.

*Black Popular Culture* is the collection of participants' presentations, most of which were written specifically for the conference. Also included are the discussions following each panel. Although the text cannot be expected to recreate the conference's energy, for me it somehow does. The book is organized into five chapters that correspond to the panels at the conference ("Popular Culture: Theory and Criticism"; "Gender, Sexuality, and Black Images in Popular Culture"; "The Urban Context"; "The Production of Black Popular Culture"; and "Do The Right Thing: Post-nationalism and Essentialism"). This enables Dent to maintain the coherence of the conference and to include much of the discussion. The individual essays are engaging and sharp and, as a collection, it stimulates critical reflection and a recognition of the need to re-evaluate the assumptions and terms of the study and discussion of black popular culture.

In her 1990 essay "Modernism,

Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture" Wallace argued that:

How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual. However, not being seen by those who don't want to see you because they are racist, what Ralph Ellison calls "invisibility," often leads racists to the interpretation that you are unable to see.

Wallace pointed out something that had up to that moment eluded me: that there exists an internal and external volition to draw parallels between Afro-American music and everything else cultural produced by black Americans. To bring Wallace's point of contention home for me, an ad for a retrospective of painter Archibald Motley's oeuvre at the Chicago Historical Society came across the airwaves of Chicago's public radio station the same afternoon I read her essay. The ad described Motley's work explicitly and exclusively in terms of jazz. I was struck by the timely incisiveness of her critique: black cultural production, regardless of what the object or experience might be, is perennially defined and coded into black musical production; or if not music, then oratorical and athletic prowess. Everything denoting black genius, an oxymoronic and consequently problematic notion, is filtered through music and/or sport; or, in another word, the popular.

The "popular" is the reproduction of the familiar under necessarily commodified circumstances. According to Stuart Hall, the popular is simultaneously rooted in folk experience and available for commodification. Consequently, it seems necessary that a white-run museum under pressure to become more "multicultural" in its presentation and audience, in a city that no longer has a white majority, would appeal to us at the level of the (commodified) familiar. On the one hand,

we have the familiar and, on the other, the commodification of the familiar. Hall, in his brilliant opening presentation "What is the 'black' in black Popular Culture?" argues:

However deformed, incorporated, and inauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different — other forms of life, other traditions of representation.

Cornel West's sobering analysis of "Nihilism in black America" makes a connection between the breakdown of black community traditions that support black individuals in racist America, and the commodification of those traditions. He argues:

The proper starting point for the crucial debate about the prospects for black America is the nihilism that increasingly pervades black communities. Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophical doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. This usually results in a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a

coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.

Corporate market institutions have contributed greatly to the above by producing the illusion that their products provide pleasure and status to consumers.

Thus, one of the questions is how to talk meaningfully about these seemingly contradictory analyses together. One way is to recognize that ideology, or the assumed reality, is an unstable interaction between the social, political, and economic structures and specific historical conditions that creates meaning for practices. Thus, underlying the ways in which the Chicago Historical Society went about advertising their Motley retrospective represents the structures of exclusion and operates in a political and funding climate that advocates equality based on the shifting meaning of multiculturalism.

The struggle to create meaning and practices conducive to the emancipation of black people is serious business to the contributors to this volume. It is a conscious struggle waged primarily among self-conscious intellectuals who, according to bell hooks, endeavor "to see things that other folks don't and to call them out." Calling out or "thinking critically about a cultural product" enhances rather than reduces the pleasure we derive from a text. According to hooks,

[E]xperiencing black cultural production from the standpoint of progressive critiques does, in fact, change the nature of our pleasure. It compels the black consumer to make a break with modes of passive consumption. It intervenes in the kind of essentialist thinking that would have us assume anything done in the name of blackness is righteous and should be celebrated. As well, it breaks with that other critical tradition that merely raises the simple question of negative and positive representation. Ironically, it is this power to intervene and disrupt that renders criticism so essential to cultural production and yet leads it to be regarded with fear and suspicion [by blacks].

Similarly, progressive critique of "articulation" (to use Hall's concept elaborated earlier in "Rediscovery of Ideology") stakes out a position that can be won, but cannot possibly capture popular culture itself for our side against the opposition.

The "enhancement of pleasure" leads to the possibility of joy which is ultimately what culture is about. Joy is an experiential concept that, according to West, forces one to look out and make connections so that there's the possibility of collective engagement. To the contrary, pleasure is commodified and individuated, the consequences of production, distribution, and consumption in capitalist societies. How do we create and experience joy in our capitalist society? And what does this have to do with "the problematic of the visual" ('fine' art, film, photography, and video) in black culture?

For Wallace, the conference represented a space where her "war against music," to the extent that it defines the parameters of intellectual discourse in black communities, could be waged, hopefully in solidarity, with other black intellectuals struggling toward emancipation. Such a struggle necessarily utilizes the resources historically developed within black communities. Greg Tate, on "Miles Davis and the problem of black male genius," argues that

the seductiveness of artists like Davis isn't from awe at their skill. It's the dangerous visions they unleash in others that make them truly arresting and irresistible, their power as dreamers to decolonize their audience's dream spaces. Or to unlock their nightmares.

The struggle will, in what may seem to be a contradiction, utilize those resources to break free of the traditions that have colonized the range of black production, consumption, and critique.

The deconstruction of the ways in which we understand our relation to the visible clearly has a role to play in the emancipation process. In her "Afterword" Wallace reiterates that the purpose of the conference was to

nurture critical practice among African-American intellectuals...to move the center of African-American cultural discourse beyond literary criticism into other politically significant precincts such as popular culture. In the process of planning this conference, I anticipated that black visual art, art criticism, and artists would be neglected (even though the conference would be given by two fine art institutions). And so, I named my talk "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?" to address this lack and to specifically challenge the wisdom of excluding regimes of visibility from discussions of black popular culture.

What will ultimately 'out' the visual, as it were, are two intimately connected notions that are re-presented in myriad ways by the contributors to this volume. First, most of the contributors question the foundations of mainstream culture rather than posit a univocal notion of "blackness" that can stand in opposition to a notion of "whiteness." Such questions emerge from the recognition that efforts to define black authenticity are ultimately rooted in an essentialism that homogenizes black people, in the United States and the African diaspora, into something artificial. Second, the argument against univocal or essentialized blackness stems from an exploration of the material conditions of existence within black communities. By taking into account the actual performance of black peoples within oppressive structures they arrive at questions and conclusions that challenge heretofore assumed knowledge.

The resulting norms of excellence for black cultural products arise from a process that includes an accounting for socio-historical experience. Thus, Jacqueline Bobo and hooks argue that the interactive world of the black progressive critique is tripartite in composition for it includes dialogue with other progressive critics, producers, and audiences. The audience must be afforded space for its voice and interpretations as well as the space to meaningfully interact with black

critics. This will necessarily strengthen any analysis of blackness and black culture and the idea of the popular.

To take one example, Manthia Diawara's "Afro-Kitsch" calls into question some discourses of blackness and Afrocentricity. According to Diawara, some Afrocentrists have turned their backs on the lived experiences of black people in New York, Detroit, Lagos, and Dakar. They have substituted one grand narrative for another in the recreation of Egypt without saying anything of note about homeless individuals and families in Philadelphia. The result, argues Diawara, is a kitsch of blackness — an imitation of the discourse of liberation and a "refuge from the material realities of being black" in London, Nairobi, and Toronto. Or to take Julien's example, the realities of being black and queer in the mind's eye of the black church and of the conservative ideology of the black family.

In fact, much of the work in this volume speaks to the narrowness of many constructions of the "black" in black popular culture. hooks, Jacquie Jones, Lisa Kennedy, Valerie Smith, and Wallace subject many of the Hollywood financed films (most notably Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood*) produced during 1991 (the year of the black film) to a black feminist critique which questions the positing of a bourgeois patriarchal family as a solution to black problems. Kennedy comes right out and asks "where are the women?!?"

From House Party to Sleep with Anger to Mo' Better Blues to *Boyz n the Hood*, the sons are working overtime to secure the place of the father, and in doing so, themselves. If ever there was a symbolic effort to counteract a sociological assertion — that of paternal abandonment — it has been these films, which depict a world of fathers and sons. Need I add, this does not take care of all of us who partake and make the collective body's life

In a similar vein, Paul Gilroy critiques the "Americentrism" of many American blacks who use the symbolism of the patri-

archal family (a sign of the crisis of black masculinity) to create an illusion of black solidarity.

Positively stated, these essays collectively shun the idea that our complicated and contradictory baggage and understanding of the world should or must remain suppressed and repressed in the closet. Attempts to create a metaphysical notion of "blackness" to ground black culture rests on the ability to snuff out, by any means necessary, differences that make a difference. Julien argues that the preacher in Ellison's *Invisible Man* defines blackness in the call and response dialectic present in the oratorical exchange between the preacher and his congregation. The fluid continuum of blackness is, for Ellison, made and remade. Consequently, "black" is an empty signifier to be found in the practices of black identified people.

The indication here, made possible with the immense impact of the work of black British cultural theorists present in the volume (Kobena Mercer is a notable absence), is the movement away from bringing a specific economic, sociological, or philosophical methodology to bear on (a) subject(s) or phenomenon(a). The contributors appear to be more interested and moved to examine from a variety of positions the economic, political, sociological, and philosophical processes that enable subjects to live as they do or for specific events to occur.

Thus, the impact of *Black Popular Culture* lies in the commitment of the contributors to an adequate explanation of the material bases and the implications of the world views that we possess. It builds on the foundation of previous work that has uncovered and made intelligible the exclusion of black peoples from the inventions, discourses, and emancipatory effects of modernity. The impetus is to talk about black performance rather than simply, black oppression: how do black peoples create and continue to create ourselves within the diasporic experience? Any answer to this question will include an examination of black people as performers in public and as interpreters of our own experience. A corollary gesture is the movement away from the black church

and music as the primary arena for black public discourse. The shift to film, literature, painting, sculpting, and video as the sites of public identity formation on a continuously evolving historical foundation of the church, orality, and music takes precedence. More specifically, the foundation and structure of black religiosity and musicality are being carried into new, more visible, spaces.

The conference poster was a juxtaposition of newspaper images of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. For Wallace, their confrontation had come to represent multiple issues having to do with the hybridity of black popular culture. Interestingly, officials of The Studio Museum in Harlem found the poster problematic and, as a result, it was not on display at the opening of the conference which took place at the Museum.

Curiously, or perhaps not, in addition to being the year of the Hill-Thomas hearings and of the black film, 1991 was also the year of the Rodney King beating and video, the trial and conviction of Mike Tyson for rape, and the video of Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry and Rasheeda Moore drinking Courvoisier and smoking crack. What's interesting about these events beyond their actual spectatality is that they highlight longstanding struggles of importance to the black community and the connection of black struggle to American culture in general. Ada Griffin argues that "many aspects of mainstream culture — which virtually everyone assumes originates in some mythological, perfect Europe — are actually products of black struggle, such as universal literacy. Public education, for example, did not exist as an institution in this country until it was demanded and fought for by former slaves." Similarly, the very idea of conceptualizing being black *and* a film maker, *and* a Supreme Court judge; *and* a woman law professor, *and* the mayor of a major city as a coherent possibility is the product of historical struggle. To that I add the idea of being black and free from sexual exploitation and harassment.

Granted both Hill and Thomas are

unlikely candidates for the black Progressive Activist Award as both claimed victim status:

**Thomas:** I have never asked to be nominated...Mr. Chairman, I am a victim of the process.

**Hill:** It would have been more comfortable to remain silent...I took no initiative to inform anyone...I could not keep silent.

However, neither Hill nor Thomas could have been principals in what sparked a fierce debate about sexual harassment, the make up of the Senate, and the requisites of black solidarity and coalition building if they were not beneficiaries of a long history of struggle. The public and visual nature of the televised hearings brings the problematic to consciousness. To be sure, the black feminist struggle against sexual harassment and exploitation predates this particular televised event. This site of struggle was different because, to quote Griffin, the importance of film and video lies in its position as "the primary apparatus for the communication of information, ideas, and history in this country," and no doubt throughout the diaspora.

The hearings visualized crises — crises among blacks over the pivotal questions of identity: "Who are we?" and "How does one know what the right thing to do is?" — performance anxiety in the face of the acknowledged white other and internal (however defined) differences. These acknowledgements are essential if blacks are to claim legitimacy in spaces that at present appear alien, spaces such as the United States Senate, the Supreme Court, University of Oklahoma Law School, and the Dia Center. Thomas Harris argues in "About Face" that the difficult, deeply personal, and funky areas must be publicly addressed to be truly able to claim a space like the Dia Center as our own. It is necessary to privilege contradictions, the ambivalence, the fluidity, and the complexity of black diasporic cultures in the (post)modern world.

Kinshasha Conwill, the Museum's director, felt compelled to close off a dis-

cussion between Houston Baker, whose presentation began "I am not gay, but I have many gay friends..." and co-panelist Marlon Riggs and audience members Wellington Love and Robert Reid-Pharr. The discussion which centered around the question why Baker chose to begin his presentation by informing us of who he is not, was interrupted by Conwill:

I feel compelled to say that it would be unfortunate for the many people in here — whom I am sure do not know who Baker is, do not know very much about black popular culture, or black culture period, who are kibitzers...I think it would be unfortunate for African American people to use a forum like this to one-up each other...because the real thing is that some incredibly brilliant people from across the spectrum have been speaking here today and yesterday...

Conwill's suggestion that we not get "sidetracked from the issues" reflects a knowledge of and experience with the historical and contemporary burden of race and racial representation. It also illustrates that the problem of the visual stems not simply from a lack of a rich tradition but a sense that it leads to a loss of control of interpretation and autonomy of the self. Seeing more directly influences one's actions than does hearing or reading. To borrow a phrase from Baldwin, it leads to a fear of the graver questions of the self. What distinguishes the aural (music and orality) and the theological from the visual is its connection to the social construction of knowledge and its role in the creation and perpetuation of racism.

The harm of racism is significant because it attacks the black self. It is motivated by the creation of socio-economic distinctions based on skin color, body features, and hair texture — all, almost always, readily recognized by simply looking. From the simple look or glance, racism enables us to look at a person and to posit a whole host of socially constructed metaphysical conclusions. (See John Jeffries's contribution to this volume for a superb description of the historical social

construction of race.) In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia Williams names racism spirit murder — an injury to an individual's and collectivity's self, spirit, and humanity through the abuse of property, contract, and law upon the objects of property, contract and law. And if we take Hall seriously when he argued in a 1991 essay that,

the critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other...there is no identity...without the dialogical relationship to the Other. The Other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself.

Black people cannot help but "see" the socially constructed pathology that much of the white other "sees," especially if it takes the form of a crisis that brings up other crises and is captured on television. The visual is problematic because it put us face-to-face with our disowned selves in ways that are not available to other media.

Many of the essays in this volume indirectly argued that the answer to the problematic of the visual is to recognize that black respect for the Enlightenment values of truth, justice, and the good, contrary to dominant cultural assertions, is filtered through the popular. The spirit-restoring qualities within black life have been manifested in the dominant institutions of the black-controlled church and the tradition of music. The problematic of the visual can render a broad understanding of blackness and of culture only by incorporating those aspects of black life that have fostered joy over time.

The text offers three distinct and inter-related answers. First, Griffin, executive director of Third World Newsreel, argues for black control of the production of the moving image. For her, black control amounts to nothing less than those productions directed by black artists on subjects and forms that reference the black experience and imagination. They are productions in which the artistic vision is

controlled by a person of African descent. Thus, according to Griffin, blacks need to own their production and distribution of the moving image. This includes developing ways to nurture and support the work of producers who are struggling to bring their visions to an audience, including film and video artists Camille Billops, Zeinabu Davis, Cheryl Dunye, Elspeth Kydd, Daresha Kyi, and Michele Parkerson, to name a few.

Arthur Jafa, cinematographer of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, argued that due to material conditions black culture is the stuff of that which we carry around in our heads: oratorical prowess, music, and dance. The question for Jafa is how to make black films that have the power to allow the enunciative desires of people of African descent to manifest themselves. Black cinema should attempt to capture distinctively black movements and tonal qualities. It should be able to capture *how* Aretha sings a song. Jafa is developing an idea called black visual intonation (BVI). BVI consists of "the use of irregular, non-tempered (nonmetronomic) camera rates and frame replication to prompt filmic movement to function in a manner that approximates black vocal intonation."

And third, as I have previously stated, is the creation of a public sphere in which critics can work and provide criticism that is not necessarily interpreted as a threat or a denial of pleasure and which takes the pleasure and concerns of the audience seriously. As Dent observes in her introduction, the conference and consequently, the volume endeavors to "understand the complexities of video imaging, the dynamics of representation, and reception theories."

*Black Popular Culture* is so wide-ranging and thought provoking that most of my criticisms can be found in the essays themselves. Most striking was the lack of black producers of popular culture at the conference. The conference and volume could have benefitted from the thoughts of the artists discussed. Lee, Monie Love, Singleton, and Salt-n-Pepa come to mind. This is particularly the case given the kinds of public spaces that many of the contributors want to create and, more

important, that the clear impact of the work of Hollywood-produced films and rap have a wide ranging impact on how black people see themselves and on, for example, white suburban youth who want to grow up to be black teenagers.

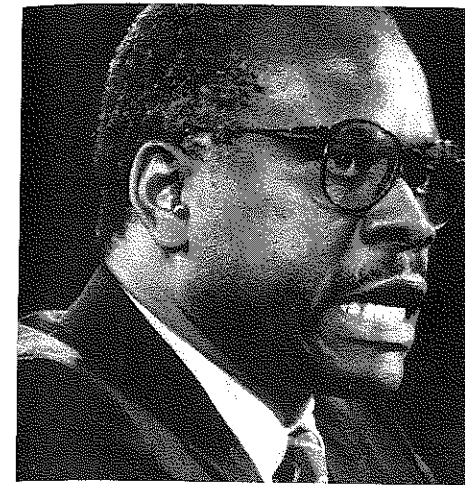
Interestingly enough, none of the papers explicitly addressed black religion. Given its mythic presence in the history of black struggle, the political power that can be mobilized through it in the present, and its slow response to recognize gays and lesbians in their midst as well as the AIDS epidemic, essays on the Church would have been a welcome contribution.

Lastly, the volume lacks a sustained theme. The individual essays address a variety of concerns and I take this to be at least part of its significance. It's postmodern, not in the ameliorated sense, in its challenge to "exclusivity of insight." In the case of *Black Popular Culture*, postmodernism is a process of inquiry and desire that rejects claims to exclusivity or purity in the name of something serious and meaningful that recognizes multiplicity and historical specificity.

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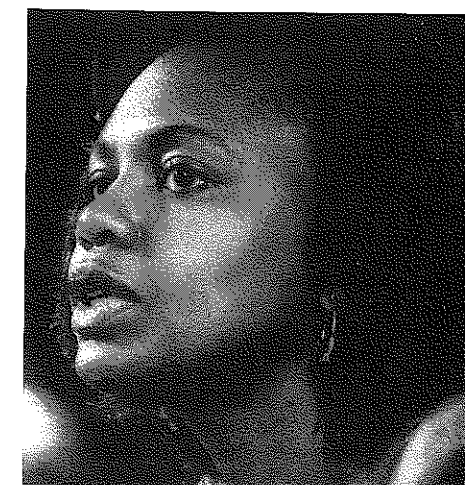
### Seeing Justice Done

BY Dilip Yogasundram

**Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality**, edited with an Introduction by Toni Morrison (Pantheon)

Clarence Thomas was nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court because he was an ideological conservative, because he was black, and perhaps because he was barely qualified for the job — a Republican take on the value of affirmative action. There were other potential black candidates who had better credentials and could be considered right-wing to boot. But it was Thomas — a political hack with little to speak of in the way of judicial experience or scholarship — who was catapulted out of relative obscurity to "inherit" the seat vacated by Justice Thurgood Marshall, the only other African-American and last liberal on the high court. This did not stop his Republican sponsors from presenting Thomas as someone who had experienced racial injustice but had overcome its legacy by will and perseverance, understanding, as they did, that being the "best man for the job" should and could have nothing to do with race — as witness this, his crowning career achievement.

For 30-odd years U.S. conservatives have attacked the legitimacy of social programmes by arguing that the high court's



interpretation of civil rights constitutionally guaranteed has been too broad, thereby interfering with subjects properly left to the legislatures. But the Republicans' claim to be taking politics out of judicial review — all the while stacking the court with conservatives who could be counted on to limit minority rights and access to abortion, and to reverse the years of liberal activism — has had the predictable counter-effect of charging approaches to constitutional interpretation as never before. This has meant that the elaborated opinions of the legal establishment have come to be quickly identified as falling into one ideological camp or the other. The fractious Robert Bork nomination loss produced this lesson: the lesser the candidate's judicial profile, the easier it would be to present a non-ideological face, the easier it would be to brand opposition attacks as "politicizing justice."

In such a situation, with a Democratic Congress and Republican President in gridlock, political calculation is apt to get entropic fast. Perhaps it's always a question of margins anyhow: getting a nominee confirmed requires that the narrative of justice, represented by and embodied in the nominee, outstrip the opposition's ability to affix political motivations to that narrative, and exceed politics in general. If the criteria of judicial fitness have come to ring hollow, race could stand in, unacknowledged, to elevate one bitterly opposed to any kind of affirmative action. Conversely, if race was nevertheless tacitly understood to be the main criterion in play, it was unassailable, given the vulner-

ability of this issue within liberal political ideology. How better to discredit and exploit the issue of race than by making of it an absent presence complicit in the calculation of political advantage and the largesse of patronage, signalling race to be indeed extraneous to considerations of a universal justice?

Thomas could therefore afford to be an evasive candidate at his confirmation hearings, shrugging off responsibility for past reactionary public comments made, and offering nothing consistent about his approach, if he had any, to handling social issues. It is now *de rigueur* not to discuss issues at these hearings that might subsequently come before the Supreme Court, on the grounds that it would prejudice proper evaluation (i.e. it would politicize justice), but Thomas didn't bother to plead this excuse. In one of his more notorious moments, he claimed never to have even *thought* about abortion rights and the constitutional implications of *Roe v. Wade*.

The many ironies involved in the nomination of Clarence Thomas are not lost on any of the contributors to this collection brought together by noted fiction writer Toni Morrison. When Anita Hill, a black conservative herself, was brought on the scene — with allegations about Thomas' workplace behaviour, which, if true, would amount to sexual harassment and to conduct unbecoming of a future Associate Justice — her testimony and the subsequent reaction threw into stark relief the problems confronting the articulation of social injustice, struggle and anticipated remedy. The essays in the book fall roughly into four areas in dealing with that articulation: the crisis of black political culture, the "doubly burdened" position of black women, the trumping of the sexual harassment charge by the cry of racism, and the public function of "diversity." What follows here is an indication of the more interesting attempts in this volume to address those areas.

Historian and political scientist Manning Marable, in his piece, takes stock of the current state of black political culture, whose middle-class members mostly represent a generation which came of age after the key victories of the civil rights struggle. Once upon a time, African-Americans could claim their interests to be