

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.

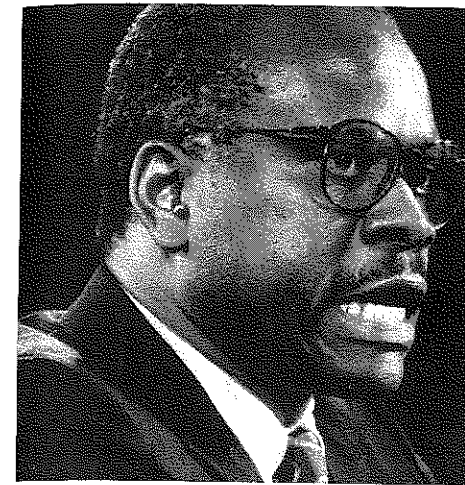
Interestingly enough, none of the papers explicitly addressed black religion. Given its mythic presence in the history of black struggle, the political power that can be mobilized through it in the present, and its slow response to recognize gays and lesbians in their midst as well as the AIDS epidemic,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

relatively homogeneous, identified in a narrative of injustice requiring clear social and political redress. But as Marable describes it, the successes of the civil rights movement and of affirmative action have had contradictory effects. Those successes have been marked, within the liberal ideology of integration, through the symbolic representational value of individuals: if individual African-Americans have achieved social prominence, this has been understood as an advance for the black community as a whole. In turn, black nationalism and self-help doctrines (of which Thomas was an adherent) have also come to feed off these symbols in attacking the "dependency" of welfare liberalism. That the interests of an emergent black middle class might diverge from those that it leaves behind — while still laying claim to race solidarity, while capitalizing on the symbolic value of individual achievement — produces a dilemma about what black interests really are.

Of course the distinction between real interests and symbolic representation is itself problematic, and Marable doesn't adequately confront the fact that there isn't, and likely never was, a homogeneous narrative of African-American experience and history to which to return. While sexualized representations of African-Americans have always circulated in the general economy of race, black culture has long maintained strong patriarchal overtones of its own.

Both historian Nell Irwin Painter and English professor Wahneema Lubiano, in their respective essays, examine circulating notions of black women as pathological, showing how the presentation of Hill and Thomas as equal individuals obscures the disproportionately powerful stereotypes that Thomas was able to marshal. Years earlier, in a public speech to conservatives, Thomas had contrasted his own initiatives for success to his sister's indolence, falsely representing her as a "welfare queen." At the hearings, some of the innuendo used to discredit Hill suggested she was either a psychopath subject to sexual fantasies or a cold calculating careerist.

This scorned/scheming scenario retains currency in segments of African-American culture: black women are held capable of betraying racial solidarity and their men

for personal ends, while social achievement is assumed to be a male preserve, often to be gained at the expense of women who, like the "welfare queen," are thought to be dependent. Law teacher Kimberle Crenshaw suggests that black women exist doubly marginalized not only by race and gender but also in the "empty spaces between [them,...] a location whose very nature resists telling" (p.403). The position of black women, then, is also a point of departure for thinking the doubled relationship of real interests to symbolic representation without resorting too quickly to a given narrative of experience, and for describing that unassimilable experience of intersections. Crenshaw's essay focuses on how feminist and anti-racist discourses implicate these empty spaces through the tropes of rape and lynching, respectively.

At the hearings, the Senators were scandalized that the lewd behaviour, described by Hill of Thomas, could occur — Thomas would have to be a sex fiend etc. But this treatment of the behaviour as outrageous gave way to a discussion, mostly outside the hearings, of the endemically social, familiar and mundane character of sexual harassment. Then, in the most melodramatic moment of the hearings, Thomas finally played out the race card, depicting himself as the victim of a hi-tech lynching. (As Kendall Thomas notes, no black man has ever been lynched on the word of an aggrieved black woman).

The most refreshing essay in the book belongs to Claudia Brodsky Lacour, a literary theorist who uses speech act theory to demonstrate just how the use of the word "racism" in this context effectively silenced the question of sexual harassment and put an end to the threat to the nomination.

Anita Hill's testimony, remember, was a painstakingly detailed account of events, matter of factly delivered; not once did she resort to general accusations of harassment or sexism. Thomas' statements, on the other hand, were of a different order and Lacour fixes on the perlocutionary function of Thomas' hi-tech rant: it presented itself as a *description* of the situation but *performed* something else altogether, capitalizing on the tensions which the word "racism" remarks. The charge of "racism"

could drive a wedge between the literality of Hill's testimony and its significance precisely to the extent that the charge had no immediate referent and could only refer to unknown forces operating behind the presumably non-racist Anita Hill.

Lacour argues that such a usage of "racism" — invoked, acknowledged and denounced — served to justify and obscure real racism by removing any specific target to which the word "racism" could be attached and examined. Moreover, Thomas' (non-)response to Hill, served also to mystify and bury the misogyny enacted in such a reply while squelching the concerns raised by the particulars of her testimony. The speech act of racism, which *does* something to displace specifics by *saying* something empty, is in its form also a model for the operation of sexual harassment. Lacour calls harassment the act of deploying words as unanswerable actions that thereby compound power differentials, differentials which in turn make possible the appearance of such a statement as a normal and smooth everyday occurrence.

Lacour doesn't stop there. Resorting to a discussion of Rousseau, she demonstrates how literality and significance are interdependent and do not function except in relation to each other. The example of the institution of property as the first speech act is apposite: the statement "this is mine" in its saying secures the conditions which allow the statement to be a description with content.

It is at this point that I have some quibbles about what is still an audacious and illuminating essay. In the circularity and double function of the speech act — of the doing/saying of "racism" on the one hand, and the thing, racism, on the other — what precisely is racism? Does it constitute itself identifiably outside of the speech act, or does it reside in the displacement enacted by speech acts? Unfortunately, Lacour gives no description or definition of racism except to equate it with hatred and unanswerability in general, so that the effect a differential economy of race and gender might have on her analysis is unclear. The claim that crying "racism" is itself racist in this context is thereby in danger of losing its own specificity. In addition, I wonder also if part of the effica-

cy of the charge of racism couldn't be due to the swift delegitimation of the political process of the hearings, with nine white male Senators, some with chequered images, arbitrating between a black woman and man. The cynical political context of the proceedings was clear to viewers and participants alike, and Thomas' "hi-tech lynching" made use of the committee's exhausted credibility. Wouldn't that accelerate the circulation of the general charge of racism and undermine the literal quality of Hill's words?

Now, part of my shock in watching the Hill-Thomas hearings was seeing the arrival of issues of social justice, such as sexual harassment and racism, played out in a dizzying manner, all spectacle and obscure political calculation. Talk of "diversity," and all that it involves, has become part of the dominant discourse of the public sphere and citizenship; it is key to understanding the functioning of this discourse and its relationship to surplus social repressions.

Cultural critic Homi Bhabha is the only contributor who pursues this direction in a dense and wild-ranging essay typical of his style. (I must confess my weakness for his writing, as his approach overlaps a fair amount of my own, but it can get to be ugly sometimes).

Bhabha explores how justice can be seen to be done when the legitimation of a common culture uniting the political process with society has become visibly cynical, and has no more need for a fixed national representation of itself. It is multiculturalism, "diversity," he suggests, which steps in to police the common culture after the end of the American dream and the reality of social chaos. Here, the crisis of value expressed in the notion of cultural difference becomes itself a value. The common culture protects itself by addressing, while containing, the issues of racism and sexism: it displays the implicit perfectibility of an imperfect system, unrepresentable in itself, where cultural exclusions are revealed and healed, and minorities become the icons of the continued existence of that common culture.

But if pluralism obscures systemic differences as it reveals them, then exposing the real structure of difference is not enough — since the presentation of that

exposure is precisely in question. And if the common culture talks of the very real issues of racism and sexism, causing them both to "spin" out of control, calling those issues a sham is most certainly not the point. My own sense is that talk of "diversity" and all that it represents must remain the locus for a political ethics which, in spite of its complicity with a certain form of liberalism, is able to displace, radicalize etc. that form. Or rather, it should remain that locus precisely *because* it is complicitous in producing a terrain of political discourse which describes the functioning of a culture driven by the assertion of civil rights. As Bhabha puts it, the social inequalities which structure cultural differences are also the affective sites of empowerment.

The containment of cultural differences that prevents them from being articulated is also what produces excesses and displacements in the field of differences. This has, in a way, been noted all along in the other essays discussed here.

Manning Marable shows us how extolling the ascendancy of Clarence Thomas involved making of him a representative of his race who overcame race by his individual achievement. Painter, Lubiano and Crenshaw demonstrate that this symbolic success of an individual depends on an appeal to black culture charged by sexual and familial stereotypes. Thus, a defender of Thomas could write that if Thomas did indeed behave as alleged, it merely represented a down-home style of courtship, warranting only minor sanction within the black community — Hill, knowing this, must therefore have had other motivations.

Such a familial characterization serves to deflect the guilt over sexual difference. Lacour describes how Hill, in speaking out, exposed what Bhabha calls a crepuscular knowledge: a common knowledge kept quiet in a conspiracy of knowing and unknowing. In the transfer from sexual harassment to racial victimage as the site of the problem, "Thomas activates a primal guilt — between men" — Bhabha argues, "which can be assuaged by a pious commitment to the myth of the 'common culture,' and an invitation to join the plural world of 'individuals' — both ethical acts easily accomplished in the ele-

vation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court" (p.247).

In concluding this loose reading of the book, I hold on to a sense that much more needs to be argued about the issues raised by the Hill-Thomas affair, that there is something incomplete about the pieces in this volume. The essays discussed here are, dare I say it, diverse, each coming to the issues from different angles, each provoking a reflection about the intricate double character of narratives of social injustice and their public function. As for the essays not mentioned here, a few are informative, most of the rest mediocre. As is to be expected in such a collection, there is much repetition of details, much groping around similar stakes, and a failure in some essays to register the impact of problems discussed in the others. Many of the essays can be tedious as a result, and at the end of it all the reader might suspect that a critically satisfying account of the subject suggested by the book's clumsy title still needs to be put together.

This could be because the essays in the book were written a year after the hearings, too soon to register their full impact or too long after to maintain any more currency. But I suspect it's neither. The problem might lie in the very nature of cultural studies, which thrives on the gaps and duplicities in the narrative presentation of critical issues, and which is understandably averse to totalisation. But just as the notion of "diversity" needs to be examined with respect to its public function, so too does this analysis need to be turned up a notch to take stock of the proliferation of writing which is self-consciously positioned on the margins. If value is capitalized on the margins, if the stratagems of political calculation are conducted there, then it may be time to open up the question of justice without counterposing its universal character to its "empty spaces." If justice lives interstitially in a "location whose very nature resists telling," does anyone know what it looks like?

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