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Joy James

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1991 these same myths and stereotypes were used to inform public opinion and debate around the Thomas hearings.

Where do we go from here? I don't know, really. but, to sum up I'd like to suggest three considerations. First, that the cultural memory of black women's resistance and struggle in this country be preserved: that we must work consciously to keep alive the collective memory of women, like Ella Baker, who spent a lifetime organizing for civil rights and fighting oppression; women like Fannie Lou Hamer who was brutally thrown into a Mississippi jail cell just because she attempted to register to vote; and 86-year-old Modjestka Simpkins, a freedom fighter in South Carolina; Ruby Doris Smith Robinson who died young, in her thirties, having given her best years to the freedom struggle. If anything, the events of this week underscore the need for African American history, in general, and black women's history, in particular. For students, it is to know this history to the extent that none could possibly see Thomas as a lynch victim. That simply

totally erases Anita Hill and black women out of historical memory. Second, I want to insist on the indispensability of black women's voices to the future of political organizing and social progress in this country, the indispensability of our voices on the front lines of change. Finally, that as black women we need to continue to work in our communities, to organize, to talk, to direct our energies inward for a change, to attend to our physical, psychological and spiritual selves, and to form networks of support like our 19th century sisters and like Black Women in Defense of Ourselves, a group of black women and supporters who took out an ad in *The New York Times* to speak to the treatment of Anita Hill. Basically we need to keep the things stirring, as ex-slave Sojourner Truth remarked over a century ago.

VICKI CRAWFORD is assistant professor of Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She is currently writing a book on black women activists in the southern Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Anita Hill: Martyr Heroism & Gender Abstractions

by Joy James

Articles written about and rallies around Anita Hill as a feminist icon or role model are part of the spillover of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings. Allegations of sexual harassment by Hill, a woman from Thomas's caste, were able to delay the confirmation of Supreme Court Associate Justice Thomas when his own political record—anti-black, anti-female, anti-poor/working class, anti-youth, anti-elderly—could not.¹ The spotlight on the hearings and the “gender consciousness” raised in the entertainment industry's coverage have made Anita Hill's name a symbol for reverence, respect or ridicule in recent feminist and masculinist writing.

While the reverence and ridicule appear disconnected from reality and based more on

gender abstractions, i.e., a notion of sexual politics conveniently and romantically severed from class and racial politics, the respect is a response to the fact that Anita Hill withstood the racist-sexist harassment of ultra-conservative Senate Judiciary Committee members during nationally televised “hearings” on sexual harassment. Although their diatribes carried the virulent “authoritative” contempt that only members of the white supremacist patriarchy manages to spew, Anita Hill maintained her personal dignity. This certainly deserves respect and praise. Still both respect and praise are weighted with irony: for Anita Hill worked to implement the policies of white supremacy and patriarchy; she harnessed her career to Reagan-Bush ultraconservatism and its employee, her

former employer, Clarence Thomas. To recreate Anita Hill as a martyr heroine for mobilizing women or feminists is only possible if (a) one disconnects Hill from the singeing racial and class politics she embraced (and likely still embraces) and/or (b) one maintains that racism and classism are abstractions to, that is irrelevant in, sexual politics. It is only possible to make her a symbol if one creates a martyr heroine as a gender abstraction.

Surviving and refusing to be silent about sexual victimization are courageous acts. Yet, survival or speaking out does not make one a public heroine; public responsibilities and commitments remain to be taken into account. In the making of heroines in gender politics, feminist or otherwise, race and class ideologies still count. For example, if a woman staffer in David Duke's campaigns were to courageously come forward with accounts of sexual harassment by Duke, who backed Clarence Thomas, although I would support her right to confront the abuser, I could not make her a heroine leaving the neo-Nazi Duke the only villain when they both espouse the same political ideology. Obviously the abuse of right-wing women building careers under the tutelage of right-wing men, implementing racist, classist and (hetero)sexist policies, needs to stop. But this hardly merits honoring such women with candlelight vigils (Northampton, MA) or lyrics to be sung to the tune of "Joe Hill" (*Village Voice*, November 19, 1991). Supporting Anita Hill's right to a fair hearing on sexual harassment reveals compassion and outrage concerning sexual abuse. Placing Anita Hill (who implemented Reagan policies, taught at Oral Roberts University Law School, and maintains that Robert Bork was unjustly denied a seat on the Supreme court) on a pedestal reveals how analyses surrounding sexual-racial abuse and democratic politics have become inane.

To place Hill on a pedestal one has to imitate Clarence Thomas, Orin Hatch, John Danforth, Arlen Specter, Strom Thurmond, George Bush and company in the wolfish cries of "lynching!" This time though, the cry of "lynching/rape!" would highlight Anita Hill. Following the opportunistic moves on political language, history and reality

throughout the Hill/Thomas hearings, one could first make trivial and then manipulate the lengthy red record of racial-sexual violence and violent racist sexual imagery which African Americans struggle to survive (or mimic contortionists' claims in a "Tony Brown's Journal" episode with Phyllis Berry Myers and John Doggett, that Thomas was "lynched" while Anita Hill was "raped"). Rape and lynching are tied together in the history of African American women tortured and raped prior to and during lynchings; and lynched, along with African American men who assisted them, for resisting or avenging rape by white men. (Since manipulating history is a useful tool for denying reality, it is unsurprising how the political history and reality of African American men engaged in sexual abuse of African American women, is equally manipulated and denied.)

The Hill/Thomas hearings provided, along with distortions and denials, equal opportunity for pedestals laden with right-wing role models—black and white, male and female. Anita Hill, who had overcome her personal victimization with testimony revealing dignity and restraint painfully lacking in Thomas and most of his (female and male) cheerleaders, was the most appealing. Consequently, in the November 12, 1991 issue of the New York-based weekly the *Village Voice*, African American columnist Lisa Jones, after describing the "Bush/Thomas lynch strategy" and the racist-sexist vilifications of African American women, writes "Anita Hill—shunning victimhood—is a role model."² Anita Hill—shunning or embracing victimhood—"could not possibly be a role model if being one means having a responsible relationship to the African American community and democratic politics. For Jones, the class and racial politics of Hill are as irrelevant as Thomas's sexual politics are for the editors of the African American Brooklyn-based weekly, *City Sun*, who treat superficially the charges of sexual harassment while writing about the detrimental political relationship of both Thomas and Hill to African American communities: "The truth is that Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill are cut from the same cloth

. . . Black people's interests were not the motivating factor for either Thomas's or Hill's career move."³ Both articles, based in gender abstractions, fail to present a discussion of sexual politics connected to racial and class politics and vice versa.

Reductionism is endemic to discussions in which the politics of sexual harassment are isolated from racial and class politics. When the African American experience was reduced to the African American male experience opportunistically performed by Thomas (which also became the *man's* experience since the woman victimized was of his caste), the *woman's* experience became reduced to the ("whitened") middle-class female experience uncritically worn by Hill. The irrational and irritating commentary on the hearings underscored how prevalent reductionism is: white women commentators on NPR would state that Clarence Thomas needed a "black" on the Senate Judiciary Committee whereas Anita Hill needed a "woman". Neither the fact that Anita Hill along with over half of the African American population is both "black" and female nor that there is no monolithic "black" or "women's" voice/vote (even among white women Senators—Nancy Kassebaum voted for and Barbara McCluskey against Thomas's confirmation) spared us the inanity of coverage spaced out in gender abstractions. Much of the analysis leaves one with models that obscure the political ties of gender to race and class and veil the racial and class politics of women and men mobilizing under the banner of sexual politics.

For example, on October 12, 1991, Margaret A. Burnham, wrote in *The Boston Globe*: "In confirming Thomas in the face of Hill's odious, highly detailed and credible story, the Senate's clear message will be that women who complain of sexual harassment are not to be believed . . . if an upstanding, articulate

law teacher who knows the rules cannot get a group of men to hear her, can a secretary have much hope?" Burnham writes as if Hill had no race (although credibility is tied to race) and refers to class in an incomplete way: the secretary is likely to be believed if she is white and accuses the black janitor. Women harassed by men of their race and class have little credibility before the law; women with race and class privilege are more credible than the accused if s/he is someone with a "lower" status in the social hierarchy—which is a significant part of the history of lynching. Referring to Hill, as if she has no race or class (interests), "as a woman" gives her the guise of "respectability"—middle-class, white, and heterosexual womanhood. In isolating sexual harassment from a race and class analysis, it also reduces sexual harassment discussions to abstractions.

Rejecting both martyr heroines and gender abstractions with an analysis of sexual politics embedded in national racial and class politics, "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves", an ad hoc group organized by African American academic-activists Barbara Ransby, Elsa Barkely Brown, and Deborah King, have written and organized around the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas episode. Ransby, Brown and King were instrumental in an educational and fund-raising campaign that produced a nearly full-page ad in the November 17th, Sunday *New York Times*. Under the title "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves" their analysis demystifies abstractions by speaking out against the partnership between destructive U.S. policies and cynical racial-sexual posturings. By Bush, Senators Hatch, Specter, Danforth and their employees. Excerpted below and signed by over 1600 women of African descent, it breaks the routine rally around media heroes/heroines and the diversion of gender abstractions:

As women of African descent, we are deeply troubled by the recent presidential nomination, confirmation, and seating of Clarence Thomas as an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. We know that the presence of Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court will be continually used to divert attention away from historic struggles for social justice through suggestions that the presence of a Black man on the Supreme Court constitutes an

assurance that the rights of African Americans will be protected. Clarence Thomas' public record is ample evidence that this will not be true. Further, the consolidation of a conservative majority on the Supreme Court seriously endangers the rights of all women, poor and working class people, and the elderly. The seating of Clarence Thomas is not only an affront to African American women and men and all those concerned with social justice.

We are particularly outraged by the racist and sexist treatment of Professor Anita Hill, an African American woman who was maligned, castigated for to speak publicly of her experience of sexual abuse. The malicious defamation of Professor Hill insulted all women of African descent and sent a dangerous message to any woman who might contemplate a sexual harassment complaint. . . .

As women of African descent, we express our vehement opposition to the policies represented by the placement of Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court. The Bush administration, having obstructed the passage of civil rights legislation, impeded the extension of unemployment compensation, cut student aid and dismantled social welfare programs, has continually demonstrated that it is not operating in our best interests. Nor is this appointee. We pledge ourselves to continue to speak out in defense of one another, in defense of the African American community and against those who are hostile to social justice no matter what color they are. No one will speak for us but ourselves. . . . —African American Women in Defense of Ourselves.

JOY JAMES is acting co-director and assistant professor of Women's Studies at University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She recently edited with Ruth Farmer an anthology on African American women in academia to be published by Routledge in 1993.

NOTES

1. The New York City-based Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) maintained in a released statement that Clarence Thomas was unsuitable for the U.S. Supreme Court because of his lack of experience and anti-democratic bias. CCR reported that under Thomas's directorship as chair of the Equal Employment Commission (EEOC): class action suits declined dramatically compared to individual cases; in 1988 that 40–87% of cases were closed because they were improperly investigated by field offices/state fair employment practices agencies; case backlogs rose from 31,500 (1983) to 46,000 (1989); processing time increased from 4–7 months (1983) to nearly 10 months (1989); equal pay

cases declined from 35 in 1982 to 7 in 1989. Concerning affirmative action, Thomas changed the agency's practice of setting goals and timetables "for employers to make jobs available to white women and women and men of color", reinstating the policy only after the Supreme court's summer 1986 decision upholding goals and timetables.

2. Lisa Jones writes that sexual harassment as "a more appealing middle-class women's issue than welfare rights" is the reason why fewer women rallied around Thomas's sister Emma Mae Martin, who Thomas, in true Lee Atwater fashion, publicly accused of welfare dependency: "She gets mad when the mailman is late with her welfare check." Jones observes in her article "The Invisible Ones: The Emma Mae Martin Story, the One Thomas Didn't Tell" that; "Thomas's distortion of his sister's life says a lot about him, but it says even more about America. No child-care or health-care system, dead-end jobs, dysfunctional schools, yes. But what of the political/media value put on the lives of women like Martin? Especially black women like Martin. The Martins of this country are pigeon-holed as sub-American, subfemale, subhuman." Lisa Jones, "The Invisible Ones: The Emma Mae Martin Story, The One Thomas Didn't Tell," November 12, 1991 *Village Voice*.
3. *City Sub* editorial, Oct 16–22, 1991, vol 9, no. 42, p.1.