



"What Has Happened Here": The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics

Author(s): Elsa Barkley Brown

Source: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), pp. 295-312

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178230>

Accessed: 28-10-2017 16:23 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178230?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Feminist Studies, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Feminist Studies*

JSTOR

"WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE": THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE IN WOMEN'S HISTORY AND FEMINIST POLITICS

ELSA BARKLEY BROWN

My work is not traditional. I like it that way. If people tell me to turn my ends under, I'll leave them raggedy. If they tell me to make my stitches small and tight, I'll leave them loose. Sometimes you can trip over my stitches they're so big. You can always recognize the traditional quilters who come by and see my quilts. They sort of cringe. They fold their hands in front of them as if to protect themselves from the cold. When they come up to my work they think to themselves, "God, what has happened here—all these big crooked stitches." I appreciate these quilters. I admire their craft. But that's not my kind of work. I would like them to appreciate what I'm doing. They are quilters. But I am an artist. And I tell stories.

—Yvonne Wells, quoted in *Stitching Memories:
African American Story Quilts*

Questions of difference loom large in contemporary intellectual and political discussions. Although many women's historians and political activists understand the intellectual and political necessity, dare I say moral, intellectual, and political correctness, of recognizing the diversity of women's experiences, this recognition is often accompanied with the sad (or angry) lament that too much attention to difference disrupts the relatively successful struggle to produce and defend women's history and women's politics, necessary corollaries of a women's movement. Like the traditionalists who view Yvonne Wells's quilts,¹ many women's historians and feminist activists cringe at the big and loose rather than small and tight stitches that now seem to bind women's experiences. They seek a way to protect themselves and what they have created as women's history and women's politics, and they wonder despair-

Feminist Studies 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992). © 1992 by Elsa Barkley Brown

ingly, "God, what has happened here." I do not say this facetiously; the fear that all this attention to the differences among women will leave us with only a void, a vacuum, or chaos is a serious concern. Such despair, I believe, is unnecessary, the product of having accepted the challenge to the specifics of our historical knowledge and political organizing while continuing to privilege a linear, symmetrical (some would say Western) way of thinking about history and politics themselves.

I am an optimist. It is an optimism born of reflecting on particular historical and cultural experiences. If I offer some elements of the cultural understandings underpinning those experiences as instructive at this juncture of our intellectual and political journey, it is because "culture, in the largest sense is, after all, a resource that provides the context in which [we] perceive [our] social world. Perceptions of alternatives in the social structure [can] take place only within a framework defined by the patterns and rhythms" of our particular cultural understandings. A rethinking of the cultural aesthetics that underlie women's history and women's politics are essential to what I perceive as the necessary rethinking of the intellectual and political aesthetics.²

And it is here that I think African American culture is instructive as a way of rethinking, of reshaping our thinking processes, our understandings of history and politics themselves. Like Yvonne Wells, Zora Neale Hurston—anthropologist, folklorist, playwright, and novelist—also addressed questions of cultural difference and, in the process, suggested ways of thinking about difference itself:

Asymmetry is a definite feature of Negro art. . . . The sculpture and the carvings are full of this beauty and lack of symmetry. It is present in the literature, both prose and verse. . . . It is the lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so difficult for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes. The frequent change of key and time are evidences of this quality in music. . . . The presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, but there they are. Both are present to a marked degree. There is always rhythm, but it is the rhythm of segments. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. But easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so that he adjusts himself to the new tempo.³

Wells and Hurston point to nonlinear ways of thinking about the world, of hearing multiple rhythms and thinking music not chaos, ways that challenge the notion that sufficient attention to dif-

ference leads to intellectual chaos, to political vacuum, or to intellectual and political void. Considering Wells's and Hurston's reflections on cultural difference might show us that it is precisely differences which are the path to a community of intellectual and political struggle.⁴

Also instructive is the work of Luisah Teish. In *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*, she writes about going home to New Orleans for a visit and being met by her family at the airport: "Before I can get a good look in my mother's face, people begin arranging themselves in the car. They begin to talk gumbo ya ya, and it goes on for 12 days. . . . Gumbo ya ya is a creole term that means 'Everybody talks at once.'" It is through gumbo ya ya that Teish learns everything that has happened in her family and community and she conveys the essential information about herself to the group.⁵ That is, it is through gumbo ya ya that Teish tells the history of her sojourn to her family and they tell theirs to her. They do this simultaneously because, in fact, their histories are joined—occurring simultaneously, in connection, in dialogue with each other. To relate their tales separately would be to obliterate that connection.

To some people listening to such a conversation, gumbo ya ya may sound like chaos. We may better be able to understand it as something other than confusion if we overlay it with jazz, for gumbo ya ya is the essence of a musical tradition where "the various voices in a piece of music may go their own ways but still be held together by their relationship to each other."⁶ In jazz, for example, each member has to listen to what the other is doing and know how to respond while each is, at the same time, intent upon her own improvisation. It is in this context that jazz pianist Ojeda Penn has called jazz an expression of true democracy, for each person is allowed, in fact required, to be an individual, to go her or his own way, and yet to do so in concert with the group.⁷

History is also everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events. In fact, at any given moment millions of people are all talking at once. As historians we try to isolate one conversation and to explore it, but the trick is then how to put that conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others—how to make this one lyric stand alone and at the same

time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung.

Unfortunately, it seems to me, few historians are good jazz musicians; most of us write as if our training were in classical music. We require surrounding silence—of the audience, of all the instruments not singled out as the performers in this section, even often of any alternative visions than the composer's. That then makes it particularly problematic for historians when faced with trying to understand difference while holding on to an old score that has in many ways assumed that despite race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other differences, at core all women do have the same gender; that is, the rhythm is the same and the conductor can point out when it is time for each of us to play it. Those who would alter the score or insist on being able to keep their own beat simultaneously with the orchestrated one are not merely presenting a problem of the difficulty of constructing a framework that will allow for understanding the experiences of a variety of women but as importantly the problem of confronting the political implications of such a framework, not only for the women under study but also for the historians writing those studies.

I think we still operate at some basic levels here. This is an opinion which may not be widely shared among women's historians. For I am aware that there is a school of thought within women's history that believes that it, more than any other field of history, has incorporated that notable triumvirate—race, class, and gender—and has addressed difference. But my point is that recognizing and even including difference is, in and of itself, not enough. In fact, such recognition and inclusion may be precisely the way to avoid the challenges, to reaffirm the very traditional stances women's history sees itself as challenging, and to write a good classical score—silencing everyone else until the spotlight is on them but allowing them no interplay throughout the composition. We need to recognize not only differences but also the relational nature of those differences. Middle-class white women's lives are not just different from working-class white, Black, and Latina women's lives. It is important to recognize that middle-class women live the lives they do precisely because working-class women live the lives they do. White women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do.

Let me here grossly simplify two hundred years of Black and

white women's history in the United States. Among the major changes we have seen has been the greater labor force participation of white middle-class women; the increasing movement of white middle-class women from the home to voluntary associations within the larger society to formal public political roles; the shift among Black women from agricultural labor to industrial, service, and clerical work; the emergence of Black working-class women from the kitchens of white women to jobs in the private sector; and the shift of middle-class Black women to jobs in the public sector. We could, and often do, set these experiences side by side, thus acknowledging the differences in the experiences of different women. And most often, whether stated or not, our acknowledgment of these differences leads us to recognize how Black women's life choices have been constrained by race—how race has shaped their lives. What we are less apt to acknowledge (that is, to make explicit and to analyze) is how white women's lives are also shaped by race.⁸ Even less do I see any real recognition of the relational nature of these differences.

But white middle-class women moved from a primary concern with home and children to involvement in voluntary associations when they were able to have their homes and children cared for by the services—be they direct or indirect—of other women. White middle-class women have been able to move into the labor force in increasing numbers not just differently from other women but precisely because of the different experience of other women and men. The growth in white women's participation in the labor force over the last two decades and the increased opportunities for managerial and professional positions for white women has accompanied the U.S. transition from an industrial to a technological economy. This transition is grounded in the very deindustrialization and decentralization which has meant the export of capital to other parts of the world, where primarily people of color—many of them female—face overwhelming exploitation from multinational corporations' industrial activities and the flight of business from urban (particularly inner-city) areas within the United States and thus the tremendous rise in unemployment and underemployment among African American women and men.⁹ It is precisely the connection between global industrial exploitation, rising unemployment and underemployment in inner-city, largely minority communities, and the growth in opportunities for the

middle-class (and especially white middle-class women) which are likely to go unexplored. The change in the economy has meant not only the growth of the highly publicized "high-technology" jobs but also the tremendous growth in distinctly "low-tech" service jobs. The increased labor force participation of white middle-class women has been accompanied, indeed made possible, by the increased availability outside the home of services formerly provided inside the home—cleaning, food, health, and personal services. These jobs are disproportionately filled by women of color—African American, Latina, Asian American.¹⁰ Middle-class Black women were hired to perform social service functions in the public sector at the same time that white middle-class women were moving from performing these functions, often as volunteer work, to better paid and higher status positions in the private sector.¹¹

We are likely to acknowledge that white middle-class women have had a different experience from African American, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women; but the relation, the fact that these histories exist simultaneously, in dialogue with each other, is seldom apparent in the studies we do, not even in those studies that perceive themselves as dealing with the diverse experiences of women. The overwhelming tendency now, it appears to me, is to acknowledge and then ignore differences among women. Or, if we acknowledge a relationship between Black and white women's lives, it is likely to be only that African American women's lives are shaped by white women's but not the reverse. The effect of this is that acknowledging difference becomes a way of reinforcing the notion that the experiences of white middle-class women are the norm; all others become deviant—different from.

This reflects the fact that we have still to recognize that being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman—that is, race, class, time, and place. We have still to recognize that all women do not have the same gender. In other words, we have yet to accept the fact that one cannot write adequately about the lives of white women in the United States *in any context* without acknowledging the way in which race shaped their lives. One important dimension of this would involve understanding the relationship between white women and white men as shaped by race. This speaks not just to the history we write but to the way we

understand our own lives. And I believe it challenges women's history at its core, for it suggests that until women's historians adequately address difference and the causes for it, they have not and can not adequately tell the history of even white middle-class women.

The objections to all of this take many forms but I would like to address two of them. First, the oft-repeated lament of the problems of too many identities; some raise this as a conceptual difficulty, others as a stylistic one. In either case, such a discussion reinforces the notion that women of color, ethnic women, and lesbians are deviant, not the norm. And it reinforces not just the way in which some histories are privileged but also the way in which some historians are privileged. In fact, in women's history difference means "not white middle-class heterosexual," thus renormalizing white middle-class heterosexual women's experiences. One result of this is that white middle-class heterosexual women do not often have to think about difference or to see themselves as "other."¹² Not only do people of color not have the luxury in this society of deciding whether to identify racially but historians writing about people of color also do not have the privilege of deciding whether to acknowledge, at least at some basic level, their multiple identities. No editor or publisher allows a piece on Black or Latina women to represent itself as being about "women." On the other hand, people who want to acknowledge that their pieces are about "white" women often have to struggle with editors to get that in their titles and consistently used throughout their pieces—the objection being it is unnecessary, superfluous, too wordy, awkward. Historians writing about heterosexual women seldom feel compelled to consistently establish that as part of their subjects' identity whereas historians writing about lesbian women must address sexuality. Does this imply that sexuality is only a factor in the lives of lesbian women, that is, that they are not only different from but deviant? These seem to me to be issues that historians cannot address separately from questions of the privilege some people have in this society and the way in which some historians have a vested interest in duplicating that privilege within historical constructions.

Another objection to the attention to difference is the fear, expressed in many ways, that we will in the process lose the "voice of gender."¹³ This reifies the notion that all women have the same

gender and requires that most women's voices be silenced and some privileged voice be given center stage. But that is not the only problem with this assumption for it also ignores the fact that gender does not have a voice; women and men do. They raise those voices constantly and simultaneously in concert, in dialogue with each other. Sometimes the effect may seem chaotic because they respond to each other in such ways; sometimes it may seem harmonic. But always it is polyrhythmic; never is it a solo or single composition.

Yet there is in the academy and society at large a continuing effort to uphold some old and presumably well-established literary and historical canon. Those bent on protecting such seem well trained in classical music; they stand on the stage and proudly proclaim: "We have written the score; we are conducting it; we will choose those who will play it without changing a chord; and everyone else should be silent." Unfortunately, much of the current lament among women's historians about the dangers, disruptiveness, and chaos of difference sounds much like this—reifying a classical score, composed and conducted this time by women.

This is not merely a question of whether one prefers jazz to classical music. Like most intellectual issues, this one, too, has real political consequences. We have merely to think about the events surrounding Anita Hill's fall 1991 testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee. When Professor Hill testified, a number of women, individually and collectively, rallied to her support and to advance awareness of the issue of sexual harassment. Many of Hill's most visible supporters, however, ignored the fact that she is a Black woman, the thirteenth child of Oklahoma farmers, or treated these as merely descriptive or incidental matters.¹⁴ The National Organization for Women, feminist legal scholar Catharine McKinnon, and others spoke forcefully and eloquently about the reality of sexual harassment in women's lives but in doing so often persisted in perpetuating a deracialized notion of women's experiences.¹⁵ One wonders if many white feminists, especially, were not elated to have found an issue and a Black woman who could become a universal symbol, evidence of the common bonds of womanhood. Elevating Hill to such a status, however, required ignoring the racialized and class-specific histories of women's sexuality and stereotypes and our different histories of sexual harassment and sexual violence.¹⁶

In the end, I would argue, the ignoring of these racialized and class-specific histories became a political liability. Having constructed Anita Hill as a generic or universal woman with no race or class, and having developed an analysis of sexual harassment in which race and class were not central issues, many of Hill's supporters were unable to deal with the racialized and class-specific discussion when it emerged. This suggests how little our scholarship and politics has taught us about the construction of race in the United States, and I think this is connected to the failure to construct race as a significant factor in white women's experiences.¹⁷ Once Clarence Thomas played the race card and a string of his female supporters raised the class issue, they had much of the public discussion to themselves.¹⁸ Thomas and his supporters did not create a race and class context. They exploited it.

Thomas's analysis of Hill's charges and the committee hearings as "a modern day lynching based in white men's sexual stereotypes of black men hinge[d] on assuming that race should be considered only when thinking about his situation."¹⁹ He, therefore, constructed himself as a Black man confronting a generic (read, for many people, "white" or "whitened") woman assisted by white men. "Thomas outrageously manipulated the legacy of lynching in order to shelter himself from Anita Hill's allegations"; by "trivializ[ing] and misrepresent[ing] this painful part of African American people's history," Thomas was able "to deflect attention away from the reality of sexual abuse in African American women's lives."²⁰ Such a strategy could only have been countered effectively by putting the experience of sexual harassment for Anita Hill in the context of her being a Black woman in the United States.²¹

Eleven years prior, Anita Hill embarked on her legal career. This was a woman who began her formal education before the Morris, Oklahoma, schools were integrated and who had gone on to graduate from one of the country's most elite law schools. When she confronted the sexual harassment, so painfully described in her testimony, the weight of how to handle these advances lay on Anita Hill not merely as "a woman or a Yale Law School graduate," but as "a young black woman, the daughter of Oklahoma farmers, whose family and community expected her to do well. It is essential to understand how this may have shaped both her experiences and her responses."²² Hill's friend, Ellen Wells, herself the victim

of sexual harassment on the job, explained much in her succinct statement before the committee: "You don't walk around carrying your burdens so that everyone can see them. You're supposed to carry that burden and try to make the best of it."²³

Few Black women of Anita Hill's age and older grew up unaware of the frequency of sexual abuse as part of Black women's employment history. Many of us were painfully aware that one reason our families worked so hard to shield us from domestic and factory work was to shield us from sexual abuse. And we were aware that the choices many of our mothers made (or our fathers insisted upon) to forego employment were in fact efforts to avoid abusive employment situations. Sexual harassment as a legal theory and a public discussion in white middle-class communities may be a late 1970s' phenomenon, but sexual harassment has been not only a widespread phenomenon of Black women's labor history but also the subject of widespread public and private discussion within Black communities.²⁴ From the late nineteenth century on, Black women and men spoke out about the frequency of sexual abuse of Black women laborers, the majority of whom were employed in domestic service.

In fact, it is hard to read the politics of Black communities, especially Black women's organizations, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, without recognizing this awareness of the reality of sexual harassment.²⁵ By the mid-twentieth century this was no longer as public a discussion in our communities as it had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it was still a significant part of the private discussion and necessary socialization to being a Black female living in a racial and racist society.²⁶ A collective memory of sexual harassment runs deep in African American communities and many Black women, especially those born before the 1960s' civil rights movement, would likely recognize sexual harassment not as a singular experience but as part of a collective and common history.

Given the economic and racial circumstances, Black women understand from an early age that figuring out how to endure, survive, and move forward is an essential responsibility. As a newly minted, young, Black professional, the pride of one's family and community, the responsibility to do so would be even greater. You think "they endured and so should I." You think you are expected to represent success. How can you dash your family's and com-

munity's joy at your achievements and their hopes that education, mobility, and a good job would protect you?²⁷

Analyses which offered as explanation of Hill's long silence only that it was representative of the common tendency of women to individualize the experience, to feel isolated, and therefore not to report such incidents assume in fact a lack of socialization around these issues or a socialization which leads women to see themselves as alone, unique in these experiences; and they miss the complexity of such experiences for differing women.²⁸ By complicating the discussion past singular explanations or in ways that truly explored the differential dimensions and expressions of power, one might have expanded the base of support—support not based on a commonality of experience but on a mobilization that precisely spoke to particularities and differences.

Anita Hill experienced sexual harassment not as a woman who had been harassed by a man but as a Black woman harassed by a Black man. Race is a factor in all cases of sexual abuse—inter- or intraracial—although it is usually only explored in the former. When white middle-class and upper-class men harass and abuse white women they are generally protected by white male privilege; when Black men harass and abuse white women they may be protected by male privilege, but they are as likely to be subject to racial hysteria; when Black men harass and abuse Black women they are often supported by racist stereotypes which assume different sexual norms and different female value among Black people.²⁹ I think we understand this only if we recognize that race is operative even when all the parties involved are white.

But, recognizing race as a factor in sexual harassment and sexual abuse requires us particularly to consider the consequences of the sexual history and sexual stereotypes of African Americans, especially African American women. "Throughout U.S. history Black women have been sexually stereotyped as immoral, insatiable, perverse; the initiators in all sexual contacts—abusive or otherwise." A result of such stereotyping as well as of the political, economic, and social privileges that resulted to white people (especially white men but also white women) from such stereotyping is that "the common assumption in legal proceedings as well as in the larger society has been that black women cannot be raped or otherwise sexually abused."³⁰ This has several effects. One is that Black women are most likely not to be believed if they speak of

unwarranted sexual advances or are believed to have been willing or to have been the initiator. Both white and Black women have struggled throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to gain control of their sexual selves. But while white elite women's sexual history has included the long effort to break down Victorian assumptions of sexuality and respectability in order to gain control of their sexual selves, Black women's sexual history has required the struggle to be accepted as respectable in an effort to gain control of their sexual selves.³¹ Importantly, this has resulted in what Darlene Clark Hine has described as a culture of dissemblance – Black women's sexuality is often concealed, that is, Black women have had to learn to cover up all public suggestions of sexuality, even of sexual abuse. Black women, especially middle-class women, have learned to present a public image that never reveals their sexuality.³²

Further, given the sexual stereotyping of Black men, a young Anita Hill may also have recognized that speaking of the particularities of Thomas's harassment of her had the potential to re-stigmatize the whole Black community – male and female. This is not merely, as some have suggested, about protecting Black men or being "dutiful daughters." Black women sought their own as well as the larger community's protection through the development of a politics of respectability.³³ Respectable behavior would not guarantee one's protection from sexual assault, but the absence of such was certain to reinforce racist notions of Black women's greater sexuality, availability, or immorality, as well as the racist notions of Black men's bestiality which were linked to that.

Thomas exploited these issues. Only a discussion which explored the differences and linkages in Black and white women's and working-class and middle-class women's struggles for control of their sexual selves could have effectively addressed his manipulation of race and class and addressed the fears that many Black people, especially women, had at the public discussion of what they perceived as an intraracial sexual issue. Dismissing or ignoring these concerns or imposing a universal feminist standard which ignores the differential consequences of public discourse will not help us build a political community around these issues.

Attending to the questions of race and class surrounding the Thomas hearings would have meant that we would not have had a linear story to tell. The story we did have would not have made

good quick sound bites or simple slogans for it would have been far more complicated. But, in the end, I think, it would have spoken to more people's experiences and created a much broader base of understanding and support for issues of sexual harassment. Complicating it certainly would have allowed a fuller confrontation of the manipulation and exploitation of race and class on the part of Thomas and his supporters. The political liability here and the threat to creating a community of struggle came from *not* focusing on differences among women and *not* seriously addressing the race and class dimensions of power and sexual harassment. It would, of course, have been harder to argue that things would have been different if there were a woman on the committee.³⁴ But then many Black working-class women, having spent their days toiling in the homes of white elite women, understood that femaleness was no guarantee of support and mutuality. Uncomplicated discussions of universal women's experiences cannot address these realities. Race (and yes gender, too) is at once too simple an answer and at the same time a more complex answer than we have yet begun to make it.

The difficulty we have constructing this more complicated story is not merely a failure to deal with the specifics of race and class; the difficulty is also, I believe, in how we see history and politics – in an underlying focus on linear order and symmetry which makes us wary, fearing that layering multiple and asymmetrical stories will only result in chaos with no women's history or women's story to tell, that political community is a product of homogeneity, and that exploring too fully our differences will leave us void of any common ground on which to build a collective struggle. These are the ideas/assumptions which I want to encourage us to think past.

I suggest African American culture as a means to learning to think differently about history and politics. I do this not merely because these are cultural forms with which I am familiar and comfortable. Rather, I do this because there is a lot that those who are just confronting the necessity to be aware of differences can learn from those who have had always to be aware of such. Learning to think nonlinearly, asymmetrically, is, I believe essential to our intellectual and political developments. A linear history will lead us to a linear politics and neither will serve us well in an asymmetrical world.

NOTES

This is a revised and expanded version of a paper that was presented at the American Historical Association in New York in December 1990 and published as "Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women's History," *History Workshop Journal* 31 (Spring 1991): 85-90. For thinking through the original paper and/or this expanded version with me, I thank Deborah Britzman, Carol Boyce Davies, Marilyn Desmond, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Tera Hunter, Robin D.G. Kelley, Deborah K. King, Jerma Jackson, Leslie S. Rowland, Susan Sterrett, and the editors of *Feminist Studies*.

1. See *Stitching Memories: African American Story Quilts*, Gallery Guide, Eva Grudin, curator (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 1989), 1.
2. Elsa Barkley Brown, "African American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African American Women's History," *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 925-26.
3. Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (London: Wishart, 1934); reprinted in Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, Calif.: Turtle Island Press, 1983), 54-55.
4. My thinking that communities of struggle are created out of and sustained by difference as much as similarity is, in part, the product of my research on southern urban African American communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Elsa Barkley Brown, "Weaving Threads of Community: The Richmond Example" (Paper presented at the Southern Historical Association, Fifty-fourth Annual Meeting, Norfolk, Virginia, 12 Nov. 1988); and "Not Alone to Build This Pile of Brick: Institution Building and Community in Richmond, Virginia" (Paper presented at The Age of Booker T. Washington: Conference in Honor of Louis Harlan, University of Maryland, College Park, May 1990).
5. Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 139-40.
6. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 133.
7. Ojeda Penn, "Jazz: American Classical Music as a Philosophic and Symbolic Entity" (Faculty lecture series, Fifteenth Anniversary of African and African-American Studies Program, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, March 1986).
8. We need historical studies of white women in the United States comparable to the work begun by Alexander Saxton, David Roediger, Vron Ware, and Ann Laura Stoler—work which takes seriously the study of the racial identity of white U.S. men and white European women and men. See, Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992); Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia," in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 51-101.
9. Linda Burnham, "Struggling to Make the Turn: Black Women and the Transition to a Post-Industrial Society" (Paper presented at "Survival and Resistance: Black Women in the Americas Symposium," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City, 9 June 1989).
10. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Reproductive Labor," *Signs* (Autumn 1992, forthcoming).

11. Social service work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often performed as volunteer work by Black and white women. With the development of the welfare state, white middle-class women increasingly were able to perform these functions as paid employees of the state and social service agencies. After World War II, as white middle-class women increasingly moved into private sector jobs, Black women were able, for the first time in large numbers, to move out of domestic and industrial work into clerical and professional positions. But they did so principally through their employment in the public sector providing social service functions for Black clients under the pay and scrutiny of local, state, and federal governments. See Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1991); Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945," *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 559-90; Elizabeth Higginbotham, "Employment for Professional Black Women in the Twentieth Century," Research Paper No. 3, Memphis State University Center for Research on Women, 1985.

12. One result of this is that women of color often come to stand for the "messiness" and "chaos" of history and politics much as an "aesthetic of uniformity" led the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes to perceive the addition of Black dancers to their chorus line as making "it ugly (unaesthetic), imbalanced (nonuniform), and sloppy (imprecise)." See Patricia J. Williams's wonderful discussion in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 116-18.

13. See, for example, "Editor's Notes," *Journal of Women's History* 1 (Winter 1990): 7.

14. The discussion which follows should not be read as a critique of Hill's testimony but rather of those who set themselves out as political and intellectual experts able to speak with authority on "women's issues." It is concerned with public discussion in mainstream media by those identifying themselves as feminist activists, primarily white. My focus on such is a reflection of the scope of this essay and is not intended to hold white women solely or even primarily responsible for the state of public discussion. For my analysis that addresses and critiques developments within the Black community and among Black organizations, see "Imaging Lynching: African American Communities, Collective Memory, and the Politics of Respectability," in *Reflections on Anita Hill: Race, Gender, and Power in the United States*, ed. Geneva Smitherman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, forthcoming). Finally, I am not naive enough to think the conclusion of the Thomas confirmation process would have been different if these issues had been effectively addressed. I do believe public discussion and political mobilization then and in the future could have been shaped differently by these discussions. Given that for two decades Black women have, according to almost all polls, supported feminist objectives in larger numbers than white women, I think we have to look to something other than Black women's reported antifeminism or privileging of race over gender for the answer to why an effective cross-race, cross-class political mobilization and discussion did not develop.

15. This is not to say that they did not acknowledge that Hill was Black or even, in Catharine McKinnon's case, that "most of the women who have brought forward claims that have advanced the laws of sexual harassment have been black. Because racism is often sexualized, black women have been particularly clear in identifying this behavior as a violation of their civil rights." See *People*, 28 Oct. 1991, 49. It is to say that having acknowledged this, race is not a significant factor in the analysis of women's experience of sexual harassment. For a more extensive analysis of this and other issues raised in this essay, see "Imaging Lynching," and Elsa Barkley Brown, "Can We Get There from Here? The Contemporary Political Challenge to a Decade of Feminist Research and Politics" (Paper prepared for "What Difference Does Difference Make? The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender Conference," Duke University-University of North Carolina Center for Research on Women, Chapel Hill, 31 May 1992).

16. For an analysis fully attuned to questions of race and class, see Kimberlé Crenshaw's participation in "Roundtable: Sexuality after Thomas/Hill," *Tikkun*, January/February 1992, 25-30. See also Crenshaw's analysis of Thomas's nomination pre-Anita Hill in "Roundtable: Doubting Thomas," *Tikkun*, September/October 1991, 23-30. It is useful to compare Crenshaw's analysis in the first with Ellen Willis's and in the latter with Catharine McKinnon's.

17. In fact, race has been methodologically and theoretically written out of many analyses of sexual harassment. See, for example, the pioneering historical work of Mary Bularzik and the pioneering legal theory of Catharine McKinnon. Bularzik is, quite appropriately, writing on white women and developing a discussion of the class dimension of sexual harassment; in the process, however, she offhandedly dismisses many Black women's understandings as false consciousness since they "often interpreted sexual harassment as racism, not sexism." See "Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: Historical Notes," *Radical America* 12 (July-August 1978); reprinted in *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 117-35. McKinnon acknowledges race as a factor only in cases involving persons of different races. See, for example, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 30-31. More importantly, her legal theory is built upon a notion of universal women and generic men which assumes that "men" are white and heterosexual.

Over time, women have been economically exploited, relegated to domestic slavery, used in denigrating entertainment, deprived of a voice and authentic culture, and disenfranchised and excluded from public life. Women, by contrast with comparable men, have systematically been subjected to physical insecurity; targeted for sexual denigration and violation; depersonalized and denigrated; deprived of respect, credibility, and resources; and silenced—and denied public presence, voice, and representation of their interests. *Men as men have generally not had these things done to them; that is, men have had to be Black or gay (for instance) to have these things done to them as men.*

See *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 160 (emphasis mine).

18. Thomas did this most significantly in his dramatic calling up of the lynching issue and situating himself, for the first time in the hearings, as a Black man, and also in his efforts to portray Hill as a Black woman who felt inferior to and threatened by lighter skinned and white women. Those who testified for him, most notably J.C. Alvarez, in her venomous references to Hill as a Black female Yale Law School graduate who, by Alvarez's account, could have gotten any job anywhere that she wanted. The following analysis, for reasons of space, addresses the manipulation of issues of race; for a more extensive analysis of the class issues, see my "Imaging Lynching," and "Can We Get There from Here?"

19. Letter to The Honorable Senators of the United States from African American Academic and Professional Women Who Oppose the Clarence Thomas Nomination, 15 Oct. 1991; "Official Statement to All Members of the United States Senate from African American Academic and Professional Women: A Petition to Reject the Clarence Thomas Nomination," 15 Oct. 1991; see also, "Official Statement to All Members of the United States Senate—A Petition of African-American Professors of Social Science and Law," 12 Oct. 1991; all in my possession.

20. "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves," Guest Editorial in *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 Oct. 1991 and Advertisement in *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1991; *San Francisco Sun Reporter*, 20 Nov. 1991; *Capitol Spotlight* (Washington, D.C.), 21 Nov. 1991; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 21 Nov. 1991; *Chicago Defender* 23 Nov. 1991; *Atlanta Inquirer*, 23 Nov. 1991; *Carolinian* (Raleigh, N.C.), 28 Nov. 1991.

21. The following discussion is not meant to speak for or analyze specifically Anita

Hill's personal experience but to suggest the ways in which complicating the issues was essential to a discussion which would engage women from differing racial and class backgrounds.

22. "Official Statement to All Members of the United States Senate from African American Academic and Professional Women."

23. Ellen Wells, testimony before Senate Judiciary Committee, 13 Oct. 1991.

24. Mary Bularzik documents the longstanding recognition and discussion of sexual harassment of white working-class women but argues that white middle-class women were initially more reluctant to make public the sexual harassment that accompanied their employment. See "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace."

25. For public discussions of the connections between Black women's employment conditions and sexual abuse, see, for example, Maggie Lena Walker, "Traps for Women," Bethel A.M.E. Church, Richmond, Virginia, 15 Mar. 1925:

Poverty is a trap for *women*, and especially for our women; . . . When I walk along the avenue of our city and I see our own girls employed in the households of the whites, my heart aches with pain. Not that I cast a slur, or say one word against any kind of honest employment, yet when I see the good, pure, honest colored girl who is compelled to be a domestic in a white man's family – while I applaud the girl for her willingness to do honest work in order to be self supporting, and to help the mother and father who have toiled for her, yet, I tremble lest she should slip and fall a victim to some white man's lust.

See Maggie Lena Walker Papers, Maggie Lena Walker National Historical Site, Richmond, Virginia. See Black female domestic workers' own public accounts. For example:

I lost my place because I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me. . . . I believe nearly all white men take, and expect to take, undue liberties with their colored female servants – not only the fathers, but in many cases the sons also. Those servants who rebel against such familiarity must either leave or expect a mighty hard time, if they stay.

See A Negro Nurse, "More Slavery at the South," *Independent* 72 (25 Jan. 1912): 197-98. Black club women such as Fannie Barrier Williams talked publicly of the letters they received from Black parents urging them to work to secure employment opportunities that would save their daughters from "going into the [white] homes of the South as servants." See "A Northern Negro's Autobiography," *Independent* 57 (14 July 1904): 96.

26. The primary persons continuing these discussions were, of course, domestic workers themselves. See, for example, "When maids would get together, they'd talk of it. . . . They always had to fight off the woman's husband" in Florence Rice's interview with Gerda Lerner, quoted in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 275; or "nobody was sent out before you was told to be careful of the white man or his sons" in Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, "This Work Had a' End': The Transition from Live-In to Day Work," *Southern Women: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender, Working Paper No. 2*, Center for Research on Women, Memphis State University, 15. It was common practice for domestic workers to gather together to socialize and/or to provide support and advice regarding working conditions, survival strategies, and so on. Because many of these gatherings occurred in the workers' homes, they were often overheard if not participated in by the young people in the homes. See, for example, Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Making Your Job Good Yourself: Domestic Service and the Construction of Personal Dignity," in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, ed. Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 33-52; Paule Marshall, "From the Poets in the Kitchen," *New York Times Book Review*, 9 Jan. 1983. Because the majority of Black women in the labor force up to 1960 were employed as domestic workers, a substantial number of African American women grew up with one or more family members who did domestic work and therefore were in frequent earshot of such conversations. In my own family a majority of my aunts and great-aunts were employed in either domestic or factory work;

my mother, even though she had a college degree, when she took on paid employment to supplement the family income worked as a domestic or in a factory. For discussions of sexual abuse among Black women factory workers, see, for example, Beverly W. Jones, "Race, Sex, and Class: Black Female Tobacco Workers in Durham, North Carolina, 1920-1940, and the Development of Female Consciousness," *Feminist Studies* 10 (Fall 1984): 443-50. Robin D.G. Kelley suggests that the strategies adopted by Black female factory operatives to resist sexual harassment may have been passed down and developed out of domestic workers' experiences. "We Are Not What We Seem': Towards a Black Working-Class Infrapolitics in the Twentieth Century South" (unpublished paper cited by permission of the author).

27. These are obviously not just questions exclusive to African American women but suggest what may happen to any group of people when so few are able to succeed and what may happen when you see yourself, and are seen, as representing your community and not just yourself. I think of Chinua Achebe's protagonist in *A Man of the People*, of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's diary entries which reveal her awareness of her responsibility to maintain a particular image even when she had not the money to do so, and of Black male professionals employed in Richmond in the early twentieth century who told me of the difficulty they had making ends meet financially when their professional positions paid very little but their obligation to represent the potential for African American people's success meant that the Black community did not want them taking on second jobs as hotel waiters or janitors. All expressed an awareness that many people depended – not just financially but psychologically – on their success and a belief that they needed to portray success and hide all traces that mobility had not allowed them to escape the traps of any of the others.

28. See, for example, Catharine McKinnon in "Hill's Accusations Ring True to a Legal Trailblazer," *Detroit Free Press*, 13 Oct. 1991, 6F.

29. One of the most egregious examples of the latter as related to this particular case can be seen in Orlando Patterson's argument that if Thomas said the things Hill charged he was merely engaging in a "down-home style of courting" which would have been "immediately recognizable" to Hill "and most women of Southern working-class backgrounds, white or black, especially the latter" but which would have been "completely out of the cultural frame of [the] white upper-middle-class work world" of the senators who would vote on his confirmation. See, "Race, Gender, and Liberal Fallacies," *New York Times*, 20 Oct. 1991, and the even more obnoxious defense of his position in *Reconstruction* 1, 4 (1992): 68-71, 75-77.

30. "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves." For a good discussion of the sexual stereotypes of African American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990), esp. chaps. 3 and 4. See also Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

31. Crenshaw, "Roundtable: Sexuality after Thomas/Hill," 29.

32. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Culture of Dissemblance: Preliminary Thoughts on the Inner Lives of Black Midwestern Women," *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 912-20.

33. The implications of this are explored in my "Imaging Lynching."

34. This became a common argument during and in the days following the hearings; see, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich, "Women Would Have Known," *Time*, 21 Oct. 1991, 104.