



Sex, Race and Stereotypes

BY LAURA MAKARENKO

None of us experiences ourselves solely as gendered subjects. We experience ourselves everyday as subjects of race, class and gender — Bell Hooks

I am a white middle-class English-speaking Canadian woman who went to a feminist philosophy class one day to discuss "race, class, and nationality", and subconsciously assumed this was not about me.

However, I am white. I am middle-class. I am an anglophone Canadian. And I am female. My life is shaped by all these characterizations, with the particular types of oppression and privilege I live with determined by racism, classism, and sexism. This issue is as much about me, as it is about aboriginal women in Canada, about black women in Halifax, about working-class women, and women of the developing world.

This experience was recently brought back to me by discussions with two bright, sincere male colleagues. They explained to me that while academic feminism is surely useful as a critique of mainstream thought, they as men had no particular interest in examining it because, well, it isn't about them. These colleagues have not yet recognized that they lead gendered lives in a society that rewards and punishes on the basis of gender, just as I had forgotten I am of a particular race in a racist society.

As a minorly seasoned feminist, I have only recently begun to appreciate the role of race in feminism. My feminist insight, limited by my privileged position, is truly only sensitized to gender oppression among white middle-class Westerners; and I have no words with which to describe a feminism that includes all races and all classes.

Then last fall, watching the Senate hearings culminating in Clarence Thomas' confirmation as a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, I was even more

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sharply struck by my inability to express what it was that was happening to Anita Hill. She is, after all, a female academic in North America — an identity I would not have characterized as dramatically different from my own. I could conceptualize the

real or purported kind of oppression that Thomas faced: he differed from the white-male decision-makers in his colour, so any discrimination by the white-male system against him would have been on racial grounds. But Anita Hill was subjected to a very different kind of oppression. She too is black, but she is also a woman. She deviated from the white-male norm on two counts. Consequently, the treatment she received was grounded in both racist and sexist ideology.

While attempts have been made to characterize the Senate hearings as an exercise in either racism or sexism, or at times racism and at times sexism, what Anita Hill faced was more than any of this. Her social identity as a black woman subjected her to yet another, unique form of subjugation that is *simultaneously* founded on two kinds of oppression.

As a woman, Hill was disbelieved and accused of fantasy, as most women would be. However, she was not "valued" in the way that white women are as the property of some white male somewhere. Hill's education, her career position, her composure and matter-of-factness, and even her conservative politics proved meaningless to a Senate which systematically worked to destroy her reputation and credibility.

Moreover, Hill's sexuality was characterized in a manner which white women's would not be. The fact that she was "there for the taking" by black men was suggested by Joe Biden, Chair of the Senate Committee. In questioning the black male witness who was corroborating Hill's story, Biden asked if Hill had demonstrated a strong intellectual will. He then quickly pre-empted his own question by joking that the black male witness's relationship to Hill must not, of course, have involved intellectual conversation.

As a black, Hill was not extended

the same sensitivity (rightly or not) about race as was Thomas. As Maureen Down of the *New York Times* wrote: "... the Democrats on the Senate judiciary committee, all white males, found it difficult to rebut the assertion of Judge Thomas, who was born in the segregated South, that he was a victim of racism. So, while the Democrats were making nasty charges of their own about Judge Thomas, they did it bowing and scraping all the way. In the end, they had become so cowed that they failed to question the judge at all about accounts from his friends of his interest in pornographic films while he was at Yale Law School, and approached the key question of sexual harassment almost apologetically." — *Globe and Mail*, October 16, 1991, A8

Despite how "racist sensitivity" kept them from asking Thomas pointed questions, Senators showed no timidity in plundering Hill although she too is black.

The message is that black men are worthy of "racial sensitivity" (be it appropriate or not); that white women are worthy of "gender sensitivity" (be it appropriate or not); and black women are worthy of not both, but *neither*. Evidence of this went beyond the Senate chambers. According to *CBS News*, the opinion of the American population mirrored that of the Senators (democracy in action). Blacks supported Thomas over Hill. Women supported Thomas over Hill. And most disturbing of all, black women supported Thomas over Hill. Americans compellingly demonstrated their ideological commitment to the oppression of women of colour.

The feminism I know so far has not provided me with the terms for addressing this experience. Gender analysis is unable to capture the particular dynamic at work in Professor

Hill's battle, which has in very real terms demonstrated the need for multiple oppression analysis. A reporting journalist noted that: "The worst nightmare for the women's groups had happened: That a credible woman would get up and tell her story, backed by credible witnesses, and come out so bloodied as to be

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Equally dramatic for these women's groups, though, is the realization that mainstream feminist theory does not yet adequately explain the implications of Hill's "race+gender".

It is possible multiple oppression, such as that endured by women of colour, is unique not only in its multiplicity, but also because such oppression has a reality that is more than the sum of its parts. If both Thomas and Hill had been white, the hearings would not have been the same minus the racism. There is something more to what Hill underwent than racism against her colour, and sexism against her gender. Instead, her identity as a whole was targeted by racism and sexism in a

unique configuration.

The Senate judiciary hearings have sent a clear message to feminists. How such institutions (and the public) react to women's oppression is driven not by sexism, but by sexism in conjunction with racism (and with ethnicity, class, age discrimination, etc.). Yet none of the Senate, the American public, nor mainstream feminism succeeded in characterizing Hill's experience this way. Feminism needs a language that can identify and communicate the multiple ways in which society subjugates women, because *all* women have a race and a class which determines all of the particular forms of oppression we endure.

Also as an academic, but first as a feminist, I am searching for ways to understand different women's experiences in order to make my own feminism more inclusive. Only then can I hope to gain the capacity to engage in a feminist theory for "women". When I hear Iris Marion Young speak about women as a "serial" collectivity, when I make non-verbal contact with an Indian woman on a train, when an aboriginal friend's accounts of her life begin to make sense to me, I begin to understand that an inclusive feminism will bring women a new power in the unity we will discover.

