

SEXUALITY IN AND OUT OF PUBLIC DOMAIN

Vasuki Nesiah

Over the past year, three highly publicized incidents involving violence against women have provoked debate and controversy in the United States. All three cases involved women speaking out against men who are very powerful public figures. It started with the nationally televised senate confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas on allegations of sexual harassment in the work place; Anita Hill, a law professor at University of Oklahoma pressed charges against her former boss, Thomas, then nominee for (and now appointed to) the American Supreme Court. The trial on Patricia Bowman's date rape charges against William Kennedy Smith (of Kennedy family fame) followed; again, the verdict came in favour of the man. Closely following on its heels, the ongoing Mike Tyson /Desiree Williams rape trial once again brought up the issue of date rape. Tyson (American boxing hero) lost in the trial court, but is widely expected to win on appeal. We should note that one crucial effect of there being three very public cases within a matter of months (together with the long history of feminist struggle over the years) is that they helped counter the insistent impulse towards reducing the broad social implications of sexual violence to the narrow evaluation of the truth or falsity of individual charges.

Sexual violence is a pervasive feature of women's lives - not just from strangers in dark alleys, but, and in fact more commonly, from family members, husbands, boyfriends, employers ... people who are able to gain access to women's bodies by reason of the power relations entrenched and legitimated in such institutions as family, marriage, employment. We should note that these cases do not simply reflect external social relations - the incidents help constitute social relations even as they are constituted by them. We should also note that the three cases simultaneously intervened in tense struggles involving not just gender relations but also the fault-lines of the discourse on sex and sexuality, race relations and of hierarchical relationships in the work place. In repeatedly implicating multiple points of intersection along a number of axes, these cases underscored the impossibility of any generalized theory of sexual violence.

The issue of race provides an interesting take-off point to explore some of the points of intersection. Race and racism intervened and were repeatedly deployed in efforts to invent and inscribe the problem to privilege particular meanings, particular frames of reference. Thomas and Tyson (and their respective supporters on the Bush administration and legal defense team) both invoked the history of the lynching of Black men on charges of sexual violence to claim that they were the victims, not the victimizers.¹ Here we see the shrewd exploitation of the history of Black suffering under racial violence invoked to devalue and deflect critical questions regarding violence in the field of gender. While acknowledging the cynicism of the Thomas/ Tyson invocation of racism, we also see the history of the lynching of black men as an undeniable part of the text against which we read race and sexuality in contemporary America. It is noteworthy that some of the negative responses to the Thomas/Tyson invocations did the reverse twist in asserting sexual violence without acknowledging the history of racial lynching. Thus in some sense race and gender were each invoked to overdetermine the other.

Certainly one sees quite telling contrasts (with regard to the stereotypes deployed, the credibility attached to different actors etc.) in terms of how the mainstream media (and the public at large) handled these two cases as opposed to the Kennedy/Bowman case. One of the factors that to me underscored the racially charged assumptions behind the handling of these cases was the extensive discussion (on the part of both defenders and detractors) in the context of the Thomas/Hill and Tyson/Williams cases, on the mores and values surrounding gender relations and sexuality in the Black community, the norms of Black masculinity etc. In contrast, there was no equivalent discussion in the Kennedy/Bowman case of the mores of the white community, the norms of white masculinity etc. Thus Kennedy and Bowman were magnificently de-racialized while Thomas and Tyson (and to some extent Hill and Williams) were 'naturally' racialized. The import of these racial oppositions are necessarily involved in the meanings attached to sexual harassment in different contexts. We thus need to be sensitive to the multiple structures complicit in the production/reproduction of sexual violence and to be aware that it is difficult to theorize about, or act against sexual harassment without contextualizing it in terms of the interaction of a number of struggles. →

Vasuki Nesiah is a graduate student at Harvard Law School

Moreover, even when looking at particular contexts, we will be faced with many and even contradictory narratives of race, gender, sexuality, class etc. For instance, these cases offer contradictory twists to the public/private dichotomy - a frame that would function to render sexual violence unseen and unheard. The fact that these three incidents involved men who are public figures served to send conflicting signals that simultaneously stressed and undermined the pervasive nature of sexual (private) violence. On the one hand, this 'public-ness' may have emphasized that, rather than being the aberration, violence against women is the norm. Perpetrators were not limited to those whom society would normally brand as psychopaths or socially deviant. The possibility that even society's success stories could be culpable demonstrates that sexual violence is not just tolerated, but perhaps even encouraged. On the other hand the media sensationalism that accompanied the very 'public-ness' of the men charged also contributed to the notion that these incidents were the exception. Allegations of sexual violence (by implication, spoken of here as mere sexual promiscuity) were dismissed as problems that beset the lifestyles of 'the rich and famous'; the Other, not us. In this story, then, sexual violence is regarded not as an every day feature that systematically threatens women's security and control over their bodies in all walks of life and in all contexts of social interaction.

There is an even more provocative sense in which these cases were fraught with the contradictions and tensions surrounding the public/private dichotomy. The fact that sexual violence, traditionally among the most private of matters, was here aired in the most public arenas, must pull at the seams of an ideological frame based on the public/private dichotomy. It is a little difficult to maintain the public/private opposition when national television airs extended discussion on public hair on coke cans, Clarence Thomas' boast about the length of his penis etc. We may see the overt phallo-centrism of the latter example as being the most explicit indicator of the tension that inheres in the demarcation of social space as public and private. In this precarious negotiation of sexual violence, one could also see that the reverse pull of the traditional frame was seen in (not necessarily conspiratorial) attempts to preserve the public/private dichotomy. It is noteworthy, for instance in the Thomas/Hill hearings, that the senators would invariably refer to Thomas by using his professional title, Judge Thomas, while they addressed Hill as Ms. Hill, not Professor Hill. Each was relegated to their 'rightful' gendered home - he to the public, she to the private!

In the Thomas/Hill hearings, Thomas was invariably addressed as Judge Thomas, while Hill was called Ms rather than Professor Hill. Thus each was delegated to their 'rightful' gendered home — he to the public, she the private.

An important factor that characterized the handling of, and response to, all three cases, was the deep moralism that accompanied much condemnation of sexual violence. Although there were important debates in feminist circles at the time of these cases, the mainstream press carried very little of this ... and even when it did give us the token feminist, we often got a distorted picture of the spectrum of feminist critique.² Clearly the dominant voice in the criticism of sexual violence (including the strand of feminism that received the most attention) carried a moralist flavor. Again and again the effort was to portray sexual violence as a vulgar offence to moral sensibilities, rather than a misogynist assertion of power that has far reaching material and ideological consequences in framing the terrain for gender relations. Moralism was quite insidious in deflecting attention from the structural importance of sexual violence in maintaining and reproducing gendered power relations across the board.

Moreover, in attacking male sexual violence, the moralist strand often invoked, and worked through, a model of sexuality that not only assumed a primarily heterosocial space for sexual relations but also produced essentialist images of sexual agency dichotomized along gender lines. A good deal of discussion of male sexuality (where the violent assertion of power was often read as the 'natural' expression of an almost primordial sexual drive), was accompanied by little, or very tempered discussion of female sexuality (such that even women's continued resistance to sexual violence

was read as mere expression of 'natural' female diffidence in matters sexual). In addition to legitimating the double standard (and/or a depoliticizing of this issue as innocent misunderstanding between the sexes), the denial of this disruptive resistance is intimately tied to a model of passive femininity). By and large, on both sides of the line, these women were only objects, not subjects, of sexual agency. It is absolutely crucial to keep in mind that this model of asexual/passively sexual femininity is the same model that attempts to control and deny women's sexual agency in other contexts. In fact even the critique of sexual violence is often contingent on women fitting this model (to the exclusion of prostitutes and others labelled 'promiscuous'). Thus we cannot draw any easy link between opposition to particular incidents of sexual violence and opposition to gendered power relations.

In evaluating any long term impact of the three cases, we come up with mixed messages. There seems to have been some positive impact in electoral politics. Over the last few months,

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more women have been voted into political office in important constituencies across the country; the impact is most noticeable in cases where women offered (unexpected) strong opposition running against incumbent senators who voted for Clarence Thomas. The question of electoral politics also brings in the question of party rivalry. To some extent the senate hearings served to emphasize that absorption in the intricacies of party politics can mask the underlying consensus between the parties by conjuring up the image of debate. At the end of gruelling senate hearings (where Hill was essentially persecuted for having broken ranks by making public her charges) the nomination of Thomas (despite what for many was quite convincing evidence) at least temporarily highlighted the fundamental ideological agreement between the Democrats and the Republicans, an agreement that was virtually hidden by the pretense of political debate. The silent (im)potence of the Democrats (best personified by the very loud silence of Senator Kennedy, representative of the most liberal wing - silenced by the fact that over the years, both he and his family had been themselves beset by charges of sexual violence), the Democrats' complicity in the nomination of Thomas (and the political climate that made Thomas possible), the extended debate on tensions surrounding the Democratic party's female and Black electoral base, etc. etc. ... all this came together in demystifying party politics - at least for a single unstable moment. Perhaps the electoral victories of women may be indication of a limited, but at least somewhat positive, echo of that moment. In a more pessimistic reading, we may see these victories as (or also as) the system's co-optation of women in a crisis management effort to stabilize itself and return to its usual course.

These cases have also provided a critical rallying point for mobilizing feminist activism in grass roots campaigns across the country, and (at least temporarily) bringing the question of sexual violence to the forefront of public debate at a national level. While the mobilizing of feminist activism is likely to have a positive impact in the long term, the impact of the broader public debate is more complex and ambiguous. As mentioned earlier, the moral sensationalism of much of the attack on sexual violence makes it unclear if the tenor of public consciousness leans towards attacking male violence primarily in terms of political packages that also include the further regulation of women's sexuality.

Moreover, in many ways these cases reproduced and entrenched all the familiar sexist stereotypes that come with the issue of sexual violence. Be it the image of the "she was asking for it" inviting female (Tyson virtually argued that the fact that the woman agreed to the date, also meant surrendering her

rights to consensual sex), the loose woman (the Kennedy team asserted that the woman's, supposedly "skimpy," panty was 'relevant character evidence'), or the vengeance of the 'scorned female' (a recurrent metaphor in the Thomas/Hill hearings) all three cases invoked deeply sexist images. As instances in the ideological frame, these cases emphasised the continuum of objectification - from a sexist pass at the bus stand to the concrete material thrust of rape.

While the outcome, (like the Rodney King case), may have had some positive effect in exposing and de-legitimizing the claims of the institutional (legislative and legal) mechanisms to render 'justice', we remain disheartened by the fact that Thomas and Kennedy were both exonerated, and that Tyson is likely to win the appeal. Although we must problematize any discussion that reduces cases to the formal verdicts alone, we do echo the frequently expressed concern that the verdicts (and the social and psychological sanctions on the women who spoke out) may have a chilling effect on women who may contemplate pressing charges in the future (and perhaps an emboldening effect on men who continue to inflict sexual violence).

On both sides of the line, the women in these cases were seen as objects, not subjects of sexual agency. This model of passively sexual femininity is the same that attempts to control and deny women's agency in other contexts.

Finally, it is important to reiterate how well these cases demonstrated the material power relations underlying the ideological force of sexist structures. In all these cases, there were enormous disparities between the men charged and the women pressing charges, in regard to financial resources, political power, access to (and friendliness of) institutions such as the legislature, legal system, media etc. The em-

ployment context of the Thomas/Hill controversy provides particularly telling insights into the deeply interlinked and mutually reinforcing effect of women's economic dependence and incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace. We have further testimony to the institutionalised power relations that continue to structure and sustain sexual violence.

Notes

1. The invocation of racism by Thomas and the Bush administration carries a double irony because in addition to the stark cynicism displayed in the context of hearings on sexual violence, we should also note that both Bush and Thomas are notorious for their concerted effort, in the courts and the legislature, to uphold the institutional arrangements that sustain a racially stratified society (for example, their opposition to affirmative action).
2. In saying that critical feminist inquiry was marginalized in much mainstream press, it should be added nevertheless that even the mainstream does evidence some of the cumulative impact of years of feminist critique.