The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, Anita Hill

Lauren Berlant


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For many readers of Harriet Jacobs, the political uncanniness of Anita Hill has been a somber and illuminating experience. These two “cases” intersect at several points: at the experience of being sexually violated by powerful men in their places of work; at the experience of feeling shame and physical pain from living with humiliation; at the use of “going public” to refuse their reduction to sexual meaning, even after the “fact” of such reduction; at being African American women whose most organized community of support treated gender as the sign and structure of all subordinations to rank in America, such that other considerations—of race, class, and political ideology—became both tacit and insubordinate. In these cases, and in their public reception, claims for justice against racism and claims for justice against both patriarchal and heterosexual privileges were made to compete with each other: this competition among harmed collectivities remains one of the major spectator sports of the American public sphere. It says volumes about the continued and linked virulence of racism, misogyny, heterosexism, economic privilege, and politics in America.

In addition to what we might call these strangely non-anachronistic structural echoes and political continuities, the cases of Hill and Jacobs expose the unsettled and unsettling relations of sexuality and American citizenship—two complexly related sites of subjectivity, sensation, affect, law, and agency. The following are excerpts from Frances Harper’s 1892 novel Iola Leroy, Jacobs’s narrative, and Hill’s testimony. Although interpretive norms of production, consumption, and style differ among these texts, each author went public in the most national medium available to her. For this and other reasons, the rhetorical gestures that rhyme

among these passages provide material for linking the politics of sex and the public sphere in America to the history of nationality itself, now read as a domain of sensation and sensationalism, and of a yet unrealized potential for fashioning “the poetry of the future” from the domains where citizens register citizenship, along with other feelings:  

[Joia Leroy:] “I was sold from State to State as an article of merchandise. I had outrages heaped on me which might well crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame, but I never fell into the clutches of an owner for whom I did not feel the utmost loathing and intensest horror.”... [Dr. Gresham:] “But, Joia, you must not blame all for what a few have done.” [Joia:] “A few have done? Did not the whole nation consent to our abasement?” (Frances E. W. Harper, Joia Leroy [1892])

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. ... [My] bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States. (Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl [1861])

It is only after a great deal of agonizing consideration, and sleepless—number of—great number of sleepless nights, that I am able to talk of these unpleasant matters to anyone but my close friends. ... As I've said before, these last few days have been very trying and very hard for me and it hasn't just been the last few days this week.

It has actually been over a month now that I have been under the strain of this issue. Telling the world is the most difficult experience of my life, but it is very close to having to live through the experience that occasioned this meeting....

The only personal benefit that I have received from this experience is that I have had an opportunity to serve my country. I was raised to do what is right and can now explain to my students first hand that despite the high costs that may be involved, it is worth having the

**On the Subject of Personal Testimony and the Pedagogy of Failed Teaching**

When Anita Hill, Harriet Jacobs, and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* speak in public about the national scandal of their private shame, they bring incommensurate fields of identity into explosive conjunction. Speaking as private subjects about sexual activities that transpired within the politically charged spaces of everyday life, their testimony remains itself personal, specifically about them, their sensations and subjectivity. We hear about "my experiences," "my own suffering," "unpleasant matters"; we hear of desires to return to silence, and of longings to be relieved of the drive to consign this material to public life, which requires the speaker to re-experience on her body what her rhetoric describes. But since their speech turns "incidents" of sexuality into opportunities for reconstructing what counts as national data—that is, since these sexual autobiographies all aim to attain the status of a *finding*, an official expert narrative about national protocols—the authors must make themselves representative and must make the specific sensational details of their violation exemplary of collective life. It is always the autobiographer's task to negotiate her specificity into a spectacular interiority worthy of public notice. But the minority subject who circulates in a majoritarian public sphere occupies a specific contradiction: insofar as she is exemplary, she has distinguished herself from the collective stereotype; and, at the same time, she is also read as a kind of foreign national, an exotic representative of her alien "people" who reports to the dominant culture about collective life in the crevices of national existence. This warp in the circulation of identity is central to the public history of African American women, for whom coerced sexualization has been a constitutive relay between national experience and particular bodies.

Hence the specifically juridical inflection of "personal testimony." This hybrid form demarcates a collectively experienced set of strains and contradictions in the meaning of sexual knowledge in America: sexual knowledge derives from private experiences on the body and yet operates as a register for systemic relations of power; sexual knowledge stands for a kind of political counterintelligence, a challenge to the norms
of credibility, rationality, and expertise that generally organize political culture; and yet, as an archive of injury and of private sensation, sexual knowledge can have the paradoxical effect of delegitimizing the very experts who can represent it as a form of experience. As the opening passages show, these three women produced vital public testimony about the conditions of sexuality and citizenship in America. Their representations of how nationality became embodied and intimate to them involve fantasies of what America is, where it is, and how it reaches individuals. This requires them to develop a national pedagogy of failed teaching: emerging from the pseudo-private spaces where many kinds of power are condensed into personal relations, they detail how they were forced to deploy persuasion to fight for sexual dignity, and how they lost that fight. They take their individual losses as exemplary of larger ones, in particular the failure of the law and the nation to protect the sexual dignity of women from the hybrid body of patriarchal official and sexual privilege. They insist on representing the continuous shifting of perspectives that constitutes the incommensurate experience of power where national and sexual affect meet. They resist, in sum, further submission to a national sexuality that blurs the line between the disembodied entitlements of liberal citizenship and the places where bodies experience the sensation of being dominated. For all these verbs of resistance, the women represent their deployment of publicity as an act made under duress, an act thus representing and performing unfreedom in America. These three narrators represent their previous rhetorical failures to secure sexual jurisdiction over their bodies, challenging America to take up politically what the strongest individualities could not achieve.

Anita Hill is the most recent in a tradition of American women who have sought to make the nation listen to them, to transform the horizons and the terms of authority that mark both personal and national life in America by speaking about sexuality as the fundamental and fundamentally repressed horizon of national identity, legitimacy, and affective experience. That these are African American women reflects the specific sexual malignity black women have been forced to experience in public as a form of white pleasure and a register of white power in America. In this sense the imagination of sexual privacy these women express is a privacy they have never experienced, except as a space of impossibility. Anita Hill situated her own testimony not as a counter to the sexual economy of white erotics but in the professional discourse of an abused worker. Therefore, in Hill’s testimony, two histories of corporeal
identity converge. In both domains of experience, before sexual harassment became illegal, it was a widespread social practice protected by law. Invented as a technical legal category when middle-class white women started experiencing everyday violations of sexual dignity in the workplace, it has provided a way to link the banality and ordinariness of female sexualization to other hard-won protections against worker exploitation and personal injury. It has also contributed to vital theoretical and policy reconsiderations of what constitutes the conditions of “consent” in the public sphere, a space which is no longer considered “free,” even under the aegis of national-democratic protections.

What would it mean to write a genealogy of sexual harassment in which not an individual but a nation was considered the agent of unjust sexual power? Such an account of these complaints would provide an incisive critique of the modes of erotic and political dominance that have marked gender, race, and citizenship in America. It would register the sexual specificity of African American women’s experience of white culture; it would link experiences of violated sexual privacy to the doctrine of abstract national “personhood,” making America accountable for the private sexual transgressions of its privileged men and radically transforming the history of the “public” and the “private” in America; it would show how vital the existence of official sexual underclasses has been to producing national symbolic and political coherence; finally, and more happily, it would provide an archive of tactics that have made it possible to re-occupy both the sexual body and America by turning the constraints of privacy into information about national identity. I take the texts which I have quoted—Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Frances E. W. Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy*, and the testimony of Anita Hill—as my sensorium of citizenship. The women in these texts each determine, under what they perceive to be the pressure or the necessity of history, to behave as native informants to an imperial power, that is, to mime the privileges of citizenship in the context of a particular national emergency. These national emergencies are, in chronological order, slavery, reconstruction, and the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. They respond to these emergencies, these experiences of national sexuality, by producing what might be read as a counterpornography of citizenship. For the next two sections I will locate the history of gesture and sense that characterizes this genre in readings of the nineteenth-century texts, and then shift historical perspective to Anita Hill in section four. Senators without pants, lawyers without
scruples, and a national fantasy of corporeal dignity will characterize this story.

**A Meditation on National Fantasy, in which Women Make No Difference**

These texts provide evidence that American citizenship has been profoundly organized around the distribution and coding of sensations. Two distinct moments in the nineteenth-century texts crystalize the conditions and fantasies of power motivating this affective domination, and so represent the negative space of political existence for American women in the last century. It may not appear that the sexual and affective encounters I will describe are indeed national, for they take place intimately between persons, in what look like private domains. The women’s enslavement within the sensational regime of a privileged heterosexuality leads, by many different paths, to their transposition of these acts into the context of nationality. Even if sexual relations directly forced on these women mark individuals as corrupted by power, the women’s narratives refuse to affirm the private horizon of personal entitlement as the cause of their suffering. America becomes explicitly, in this context, accountable for the sexual exploitation it authorizes in the guise of the white male citizen’s domestic and erotic privilege.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* registers many moments of intense corporeal stress, but one particular transitional gesture measures precisely on Harriet Jacobs’s body the politics of her situation: hers is a hybrid experience of intimacy and alienation of a kind fundamental to African American women’s experience of national sexuality under slavery. A mulatta, she was thought by some whites to be beautiful, a condition (as she says) that doubles the afflictions of race. She writes that the smallest female slave child will learn that “If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave” (28). Racial logic gave America a fantasy image of its own personal underclass, with European-style beauty in the slave population justifying by nature a specific kind of exploitation by whites, who could mask their corporeal domination of all slaves in fantasies of masculine sexual entrapment by the slave women’s availability and allure. For dark-skinned “black” women this form of exploitation involved rape and forced reproduction. These conditions applied to mulatta women too, but the lightness of these
women also provided material for white men’s parodic and perverse fantasies of masking domination as love and conjugal decorum. They set up a parallel universe of sexual and racial domestic bliss and heterosexual entitlement; this involved dressing up the beautiful mulatta and playing white-lady-of-the-house with her, building her a little house that parodied the big one, giving her the kinds of things that white married ladies received, only in this instance without the protections of law. Jacobs herself was constantly threatened with this fancy life, if only she would consent to it.

This relation of privilege, which brought together sexual fantasy and the law, disguised enslavement as a kind of courtship, and as caricature was entirely a production of the intentions and whims of the master. Harriet Jacobs was involved in an especially intricate and perverse game of mulatta sexual guerilla theater. One of her moves in this game was to become sexually involved with a white man other than her owner, Dr. Flint. (This man’s nom de théâtre is “Mr. Sands,” but his real name was Samuel Tredwell Sawyer and he was a United States Congressman, a status to which I will return in the next section.) Jacobs reports that Mr. Sands seemed especially sympathetic to her plight and that of their two children, and when he is introduced in the narrative’s first half he seems to represent the promise of a humane relation between the sexes in the South—despite the fractures of race and in contrast to the sexual and rhetorical repertoire of violences with which Dr. Flint tortures Jacobs and her family. But the bulk of Incidents finds Jacobs in constant psychic torture about Sands himself. Her anxiety about whether he will remember her when she is gone, and remember his promises to free their children, makes her risk life and limb several times to seek him out:

“There was one person there, who ought to have had some sympathy with [my] anxiety; but the links of such relations as he had formed with me, are easily broken and cast away as rubbish. Yet how protectingly and persuasively he once talked to the poor, helpless, slave girl! And how entirely I trusted him! But now suspicions darkened my mind” (142). No longer believing that Sands is a man of his word, Jacobs at length decides to escape—not at first from the South, but from Dr. Flint, following an intricately twisted path through the swamps, the hollow kitchen floors, and the other covert spaces of safety semi-secured by the slave community. This spatial improvisation for survival culminates in a move to her grandmother’s attic, where she spends seven years of so-called freedom, the price of which was lifelong nervous and muscular disruptions of her
body. On the last day of her transition from enslavement, which was also the end of her freedom of movement, Jacobs’s final act was to walk the public streets of her home town (Edenton, North Carolina) in disguise, one that required perverse elaborations of the already twisted epidermal schema of slavery. In her traveling clothes she does not assume white “lady’s” apparel but hides her body in men’s “sailor’s clothes” and mimes the anonymity of a tourist, someone who is passing through; second, in this last appearance in her native town she appears in blackface, her skin darkened with charcoal. A juridically black woman whose experience of slavery as a mulatta parodies the sexual and domestic inscription of whiteness moves away from slavery by recrossing the bar of race and assuming the corporeal shroud of masculinity. This engagement with the visible body fashions her as absolutely invisible on the street. Moving toward escape, she passes “several people whom [she] knew,” but they do not recognize her. Then “the father of my children came so near that I brushed against his arm; but he had no idea who it was” (113).

When Mr. Sands does not recognize Jacobs, though he sees her and touches her body, it becomes prophetically clear how specific his interest in her was. He desired a mulatta, a woman who signifies white but provides white men a different access to sexuality. Dressed as a man, she is invisible to him. With a black face, she is invisible to him, no longer an incitement to his desire. Touching him she thinks about other kinds of intimacy they have had—she calls him the father of their children—but in a certain sense her body registers what is numb to his because he is privileged. He has the right to forget and to not feel, while sensation and its memory are all she owns. This is the feeling of what we might call the slave’s two bodies: sensual and public on the one hand; vulnerable, invisible, forgettable on the other. It is not surprising in this context that until Jean Fagan Yellin performed her research, the scholarly wisdom was that Harriet Jacobs could not have produced such a credible narrative. Her articulate representation of her sensational experience seemed itself evidence for the fraudulence of her authorship claims.

If Jacobs experiences as a fact of life the political meaninglessness of her own sensations, Harper represents the process whereby Iola is disenfranchised of her sensations. In the following passage Iola discovers that she is a slave, politically meaningful but, like Jacobs, sensually irrelevant. Harper meticulously narrates Iola’s sustained resistance to the theft of her senses by the corporeal fantasies of the slave system. This resistance is a privilege Iola possesses because of the peculiar logic of
racial identity in America, which draws legal lines that disregard the data of subjectivity when determining the identity of "race." Iola is a mulatto raised in isolated ignorance of her mother's racial history. Her mother Marie was a Creole slave of Eugene Leroy's, manumitted and educated by him before their marriage. Against Marie's wishes, the father insists that the children grow up in ignorance of their racial complexity, the "cross" in their blood. He does this to preserve their self-esteem, which is founded on racial unconsciousness and a sense of innate freedom (84). When the father dies, an unscrupulous cousin tampers with Marie's manumission papers and convinces a judge to negate them. He then sends a lawyer to trick Iola into returning South and thus to slavery. Her transition between lexicons, laws, privileges, and races takes place, appropriately, as a transition from dreaming to waking. She rides on the train with the lawyer who will transport her "home" to the slave system, but she is as yet unknowing, dreaming of her previous domestic felicity:

In her dreams she was at home, encircled in the warm clasp of her father's arms, feeling her mother's kisses lingering on her lips, and hearing the joyous greetings of the servants and Mammy Liza's glad welcome as she folded her to her heart. From this dream of bliss she was awakened by a burning kiss pressed on her lips, and a strong arm encircling her. Gazing around and taking in the whole situation, she sprang from her seat, her eyes flashing with rage and scorn, her face flushed to the roots of her hair, her voice shaken with excitement, and every nerve trembling with angry emotion. (103)

When, like the Prince in a debauched Sleeping Beauty, the lawyer kisses Iola, he awakens her and all of her senses to a new embodiment. At first Iola dreams of life in the white family, with its regulated sexualities and the pleasure of its physical routine. Feeding her father's arms, kissing her mother, hearing the servants, snuggling with mammy: these are the idealized domestic sensations of white feminine plantation privilege, which provides a sensual system that is safe and seems natural. This is why Iola does not understand the lawyer's violation of her body. Since he already sees her as public property, authorized by a national slave system, he feels free to act without her prior knowledge, while she still feels protected by white sexual gentility. Thus the irony of her flashing-eyed, pulsating response: to Iola this is the response of legitimate self-protectiveness, but to the lawyer the passion of her resistance actually increases her value on the slave market. Her seduction and sub-
mission to the master’s sexuality would reflect the victory of his economic power, which is a given. Her sensations make no sense to the slave system; therefore they are no longer credible. Her relation to them makes no difference. This is the most powerful index of powerlessness under the law of the nation.

**Slavery, Citizenship, and Utopia: Some Questions About America**

I have described the political space where nothing follows from the experience of private sensation as a founding condition of slave subjectivity, a supernumary nervous system here inscribed specifically and sexually on the bodies and minds of slave women. We see, in the narratives of Jacobs and Iola Leroy, that the process of interpellating this affective regime was ongoing, and that no rhetoric could protect them from what seemed most perverse about it, the permission it seemed to give slave owners to create sexual fantasies, narratives, masquerades of domesticity within which they could pretend not to dominate women, or to mediate their domination with displays of expenditure and chivalry.

But if this blurring of the lines between domination and play, between rhetorical and physical contact, and between political and sexual license always worked to reinforce the entitled relation to sensation and power the master culture enjoyed, both *Incidents* and *Iola Leroy* tactically blur another line—between personal and national tyranny. In the last section I described the incommensurate experiences of intimacy under slavery. Here I want to focus on how these intimate encounters with power structure Jacobs’s and Harper’s handling of the abstract problem of *nationality* as it is experienced—not as an idea, but as a force in social life, in experiences that mark the everyday. For Jacobs, writing before Emancipation, the nation as a category of experience is an archive of painful anecdotes, bitter feelings, and precise measurements of civic failure. She derives no strength from thinking about the possibilities of imagined community: hers is an anti-utopian discourse of amelioration. In contrast, Harper writes after the war and enfranchisement. These conditions for a post-diasporic national fantasy provide the structure for her re-imagination of social value and civic decorum in a radically reconstructed America. The felt need to transform painful sexual encounters into a politics of nationality drove both of these women to revise radically the lexicon and the narratives by which the nation appears as a horizon both of dread and of fantasy.
Jacobs’s *Incidents* was written for and distributed by white abolitionists whose purpose was to demonstrate not just how scandalous slavery was but how central sexuality was in regulating the life of the slave. Yet the reign of the master was not secured simply through the corporeal logics of patriarchy and racism. Jacobs shows a variety of other ways her body was erotically dominated in slavery—control over movement and sexuality, over time and space, over information and capital, and over the details of personal history that govern familial identity—and links these scandals up to a powerful critique of America, of the promises for democracy and personal mastery it offers to and withholds from the powerless.

Jacobs’s particular point of entry to nationality was reproductive. The slave mother was the “country” into which the slave child was born, a realm unto herself whose foundational rules constituted a parody of the birthright properties of national citizenship. Jacobs repeatedly recites the phrase “follow the condition of the mother,” framed in quotation marks, to demonstrate her only positive representation in the law, a representation that has no entitlement, a paradoxically American mantra as fundamental as another phrase about following she had no right to use, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

But the technicalities of freedom were not enough to satisfy Jacobs that America had the potential to fulfill its stated mission to be a Christian country. To gain free, unencumbered motherhood would be to experience the inversion of the sexual slavery she has undergone as a condition of her noncitizenship: at the end of the text, her freedom legally secured, she considers herself still unfree in the absence of a secure domestic space for her children. But if Jacobs’s relation to citizenship in the abstract is bitter and despairing, her most painful nationally authorized contact was intimate, a relation of frustrating ironic proximity.

I have characterized her sexual and reproductive relation with Mr. Sands, the United States Congressman Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. A truly sentimental fiction would no doubt reveal something generous about Congressman Sawyer, about a distinguished political career that might have included, somehow, traces of the influence Jacobs had on Sawyer’s consciousness, revealed in a commitment to securing legal consensus on the humanity of slaves; and it would be simply trivial to note that issues of the *Congressional Globe* from 1838 reveal him in another universe of political consciousness, entirely undistinguished (he seems concerned with laws regulating duelling). More important, *Incidents* establishes that his rise
to national office directly correlated with his increasing disregard for his promises to emancipate their children and her brother, both of whom he had brought from Flint in isolated acts of real empathy for Jacobs. Like many liberal tyrants, Sawyer so believes that his relative personal integrity and good intentions place him above moral culpability that he has no need to act morally within the law. Indeed, the law is the bar to empathy. When Harriet's brother William escapes from him, Sawyer says petulantly, "I trusted him as if he were my own brother, and treated him as kindly. . . . but he wanted to be a free man. . . . I intended to give him his freedom in five years. He might have trusted me. He has shown himself ungrateful; but I shall not go for him, or send for him. I feel confident that he will soon return to me" (135–36).

Later, Jacobs hears a quite different account from her brother, but what's crucial here is that the congressman whose sexual pleasure and sense of self-worth have been secured by the institution of slavery is corrupted by his proximity to national power. Yet Jacobs speaks the language of power, while Sawyer speaks the language of personal ethics; she looks to political solutions, while his privilege under the law makes its specific constraints irrelevant to him. Under these conditions Jacobs concludes three things about the politics of national sexuality. One is borne out by the performative history of her own book: "If the secret memoirs of many members of Congress should be published, curious details [about the sexual immorality of official men] would be unfolded" (142). The second she discovers as she returns from a trip to England where she has found political, sexual, racial, and spiritual peace and regeneration: "We had a tedious winter passage, and from the distance spectres seemed to rise up on the shores of the United States. It is a sad feeling to be afraid of one's native country" (186). Third, and finally, having established America as a negative space, a massive space of darkness, ghosts, shame, and barbarism, Jacobs sees no possibility that political solutions will ameliorate the memory and the ongoing pain of African American existence—as long as law marks a border between abstract and practical ethics. By the end of Incidents national discourse itself has become a mode of memorial rhetoric, an archive of dead promises.

I have identified thus two kinds of experience of the national for Jacobs: the actual pain of its practical betrayals through the many conscriptions of her body that I am associating with national sexuality and a psychic rage at America for not even trying to live up to the conditions of citizenship it promises in law and in spirit. After emancipation, in 1892 when
Frances Harper is writing *Iola Leroy*, speaking at suffrage conferences, at the National Congress of Negro Women, and at the Columbian Exposition, she imagines that citizenship might provide a model of identity that ameliorates the experience of corporeal mortification that has sustained American racisms and misogyny. Harper argues that "more than the changing of institutions we need the development of a national conscience, and the upbuilding of national character," but she imagines this project of reconstruction more subtly and more radically than this kind of nationalistic rhetoric might suggest. She refuses the lure of believing that the discourse of disembodied democratic citizenship applies to black Americans: she says, "You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man's hand against me." But Jacobs's solution to the enigma of social life under racism and misogyny—to privatize social relations—was not the only solution to this violent touching of hands. In contrast to Jacobs's narrative, Harper's *Iola Leroy* seizes the scene of citizenship from white America and rebuilds it, in the classic sense, imagining a liberal public sphere located within the black community. More than a critical irritant to the white "people," the text subverts the racially dominant national polity by rendering it irrelevant to the fulfillment of its own national imaginary. Harper's civic and Christian black American nationality depends not only on eliding the horizon of white pseudo-democracy; she also imagines that African American nationalism will provide a model of dignity and justice that white American citizens will be obliged to follow.

A double movement of negation and theorization transforms the condition of citizenship as the novel imagines it. Harper's critical tactic banishes white Americans from the utopian political imaginary activity of this text. The initial loss of white status is performed, however, not as an effect of African American rage but rather as an act of white political rationality. A general in the Northern Army, encountering the tragedy of Iola's specific history and the detritus of the war, disavows his own identification as an American: he thinks, "Could it be possible that this young and beautiful girl had been a chattel, with no power to protect herself from the highest insults that lawless brutality could inflict upon innocent and defenseless womanhood? Could he ever again glory in his American citizenship, when any white man, no matter how coarse, cruel, or brutal, could buy or sell her for the basest purposes? Was it not true that the
cause of a hapless people had become entangled with the lightnings of heaven, and dragged down retribution upon the land?" (39). This repudiation envelops national, racial, and gendered self-disenfranchisement, and clears the way for a postpatriarchal, postracist, Christian commonwealth. Its ethical aura hovers over the novel's postwar narrative as well: Iola's experience of racism and misogyny in the metropolitan and commercial spaces of the North induces more pronouncements by whites about the unworthiness of white people to lead America in official and everyday life, since it is white national culture that has transformed the country from a space of enlightenment to a place of what she calls shadows and foreshadowing.

Such political self-impeachments by whites make it possible for Harper to reinvent a truly African American–centered American citizenship. In this sense, race in Iola Leroy is not solely a negative disciplinary category of national culture but becomes an archive of speech and life activities recast as a political arsenal. The originary form for African American insurgent community building derives from the subversive vernacular practices of slave life—from, as the first chapter title suggests, "The Mystery of Market Speech and Prayer Meetings." The narrative opens in the marketplace, where the slaves are shown to use an allegorical language to communicate and to gossip illegally about the progress of freedom during the Civil War. Just as the white masters travel, "talking politics in... State and National capitals" (7), slaves converse about the freshness of butter, eggs, and fish: but these ordinary words turn out to contain covert communication from the battlefield (7–8). In addition to exploiting the commercial space, the slave community performs its political identity at prayer meetings, where more illegal communication about the war and everyday life under slavery also transpires in allegory and secrecy.

The internal communications and interpretations of the community become public and instrumental in a different way after the war, when the place where the community met to pray to God and for freedom is transformed into a site where families dispersed by slavery might recombine: "They had come to break bread with each other, relate their experiences, and tell of their hopes of heaven. In that meeting were remnants of broken families—mothers who had been separated from their children before the war, husbands who had not met their wives for years" (179). These stories demonstrating kinship locate it not, however, in memories of shared lives or blood genealogies but rather in common memories of
the violence of familial separation and dispersal. Under the conditions of legal impersonality which had governed slave personhood, the repetition of personal narratives of loss is the only currency of identity the slaves can exchange. The collective tactic here after slavery is to circulate self-descriptions in the hope that they will be repeated as gossip and heard by relatives, who will then come to the next convention and recite their own autobiographies in the hope that the rumor was true, that their story had an echo in someone else's life.

The collective storytelling about the diasporic forces of slavery is reinvented after the migration north, in salons where what Harper calls conversazione take place. Habermas and Landes have described the central role of the salon in building a public sphere. Its function was to make the public sphere performatively democratic: more permeable by women and the ethnic and class subjects who had been left out of aristocratic privilege and who learn there to construct a personal and collective identity through the oral sharing of a diversity of written ideas. Harper explains at great length how conventions and conversazione transformed what counted as “personal” testimony in the black community: the chapter “Friends in Council,” for example, details papers and contentious conversations about them entitled “Negro Emigration,” “Patriotism,” “Education of Mothers,” and “Moral Progress of the Race,” and a poem written by Harper herself entitled “Rallying Cry.” All of these speeches and the conversations about them focus on uplifting the race and rethinking history; and the conditions of uplifting require imagining a just America, an America where neither race nor sexuality exists as a mode of domination. As Iola's friend, Miss Delaney, says, “I want my pupils to do all in their power to make this country worthy of their deepest devotion and loftiest patriotism” (251). Finally, after these face-to-face communities of African Americans seeking to transform their enslaved identities into powerful cultural and political coalitions are established, a literary tradition becomes possible: Iola herself is asked to serve the race by writing the story of her life that is this novel. Harper, in the afterword to the novel, imagines a new African American literature, “glowing with the fervor of the tropics and enriched by the luxuriance of the Orient.” This revisionary aesthetic will, in her view, fill the African American “quota of good citizenship” and thus “add to the solution of our unsolved American problem” (282). In sum, the transmission of personal narrative, inscribed into the interiority of a community, becomes a vehicle for social transformation in Iola Leroy, recombining into a multicultural,
though not multiracial, public sphere of collective knowledge. In so reconstructing through mass-circulated literature the meaning of collective personhood, and in so insisting on a “quota system” of good citizenship based not on racial assimilation but on a national ethics, the African American community Harper imagines solves the problem of America for itself.

Diva Citizenship

When you are born into a national symbolic order that explicitly marks your person as illegitimate, far beyond the horizon of proper citizenship, and when your body also becomes a site of privileged fantasy property and of sexual contact that the law explicitly proscribes but privately entitles, you inhabit the mulatta’s genealogy, a genealogy of national experience. The national body is ambiguous because its norms of privilege require a universalizing logic of disembodiment, while its local, corporeal practices are simultaneously informed by that legal privilege and—when considered personal, if not private—are protected by the law’s general proximity. The African American women of this narrative understood that only a perversely “un-American” but nationally addressed text written from the history of a national subculture could shock white citizens into knowing how compromised citizenship has been as a category of experience and fantasy, not least for the chastised American classes.

This question of sexual harassment is thus not just a “woman’s” question. A charged repertoire of private domination and erotic theatricality was licensed by American law and custom: to encounter the African American women of whom I have written here, and many others, whose locations in hierarchies of racism, homophobia, and misogyny will require precisely and passionately written counter-histories. In twentieth-century America, anyone coded as “low,” embodied, or subculturally “specific” continues to experience, with banal regularity, the corporeal sensation of nationality as a sensation over which she/he has no control. This, in the broadest sense, is sexual harassment. These texts break the sanitizing silences of sexual privacy in order to create national publics trained to think, and thus to think differently, about the corporeal conditions of citizenship. One of these conditions was the evacuation of erotic or sexual or even sensational life itself as a possible ground of personal dignity for African American women in America. As the rational, antipassional logic of Incidents and Iola Leroy shows, the desire to become
national seems to call for a release from sensuality—this is the cost, indeed the promise, of citizenship.

But the possibility of a revitalized national identity flickers in traces of peculiar identification within these texts. I call this possibility Diva Citizenship, but can only describe, at this point, the imaginable conditions of its emergence as an unrealized form of political activity. Diva Citizenship has a genealogy too, a dynastic, dignified, and pleasing one. It courses through a variety of media forms and public spheres—from the Old Testament through CNN, through the works of bell hooks, Donna Haraway, Wayne Koestenbaum, and others. For Haraway, cyborg citizenship replaces the “public/private” distinction as a paradigm for political subjectivity; hooks similarly derives the potential politics of the “third world diva girl” from the everyday forms of assertive and contesting speech she absorbed among “Southern black folk.” These forms of speech are lived as breaches of class decorum between and among white, Third World, and African American feminists who discipline the ways women take, hold, use, respect, or demonize public authority; hooks sees the transgression of these decorums as central to liberation politics. For Koestenbaum, the Diva’s public merging of “ordinariness touched by sublimity” has already been crucial to the emergence of a “collective gay subcultural imagination,” where the public grandiosity of survival, the bitter banality of negotiating everyday life, generates subversive gossip about icons that actually works to create counterculture. “Where there is fever,” he writes, “the need for police arises.” Crossing police barricades and the civilizing standards of public life, Diva Citizenship takes on as a national project redefining the scale, the volume, and the erotics of “what you can [sincerely] do for your country.”

One strategy of slave literature has been its royalist strain. In Iola Leroy, Harper locates the promise of Diva Citizenship in the Biblical story of Queen Esther. Marie, Iola Leroy’s mother, makes an abolitionist speech, executing a performance of refracting ironies. Marie speaks as a Creole slave woman to a free white audience on the day she graduates from the “finishing” school that will enable her to pass as the white wife of Albert Leroy: “Like Esther pleading for the lives of her people in the Oriental courts of a despotic king, she stood before the audience, pleading for those whose lips were sealed, but whose condition appealed to the mercy and justice of the Nation” (75). The analogies between Marie and Esther are myriad: forced to pass as a Persian in the court of Ahasuerus, the King and her husband, Esther speaks as a Jew to save her people
from genocide. She mobilizes her contradictions to unsettle the representational and political machinery of a dominant culture that desires her. It is not only in the gesture of special pleading that Marie absorbs Esther, but in the analogy between the mulatta woman and the assimilated Jew. Esther's capacity to pass likewise not only made her erotic masquerade the default activity of her everyday embodiment but also gave her sexual access to power—which she used not in a prevaricating way but under the pressure of a diasporic ethics. Purim, Queen Esther's holiday, is offered as a day of masquerade, revelry, and rage at tyranny—although as a story additionally about a wronged Queen ( Vashti) and a holocaust, its status as an origin tale of domestic and imperial violence cannot be glossed over. But Queen Esther stands in Harper's text as another foreign national separated at birth from the privileges of nationality, and also as a slave to masterly fantasies of sexual hierarchy and sensational excess who learned to countertheatricalize her identity and to wield it against injustice.

Jacobs's contribution to this monarchical fantasy politics deploys the Queen not as a figure of tactical self-distortion and instrumental sexual intimacy but as a figure of superior power who remakes the relations between politics and the body in America. She represents the "state of civilization in the late nineteenth century of the United States" by showing a variety of indirect and noncoherent ways the nation came into deliberate contact with slaves—through scandalous and petty torture. In turn, Jacobs shows how the slaves misrecognize, in potentially and sometimes strategically radical ways, what constitutes the nation. This passage takes place in an extraordinary chapter titled "What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North." Jacobs describes at great ragsful length the relation between the sexual brutality of masters to slaves and their lies, what she calls "the pains" masters take to construct false scenarios about "the hard kind of freedom" that awaited freed or escaped slaves in the North. She argues that these slaves, so demoralized by the impossibility of imagining political freedom, become actively complicit in the local scene of sexual savagery—actually sneaking "out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters" (44)—because sexuality is the only exchange value the slaves pseudo-possess. Jacobs takes the example of these relations of misrecognition and affective distortion and turns them back on the nation:

One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over. She said her husband told her that the black people had sent word to the queen
of 'Merica that they were all slaves; that she didn’t believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. They quarrelled; she drew her sword upon him, and swore that he should help her to make them all free.

That poor ignorant woman thought that America was governed by a Queen, to whom the President was subordinate. I wish the President was subordinate to Queen Justice. (45)

Let us suppose it were true that the Queen of America came down to Washington and put the knife to the President’s throat. Her strategy would be to refute his privilege, and that of citizens like him, to be above the sensational constraints of citizenship. The Queen of America educates him about his own body’s boundaries with a cold tip of steel, and he emancipates the slaves. But Jacobs, never one to give the nation credit for even potentially recognizing its excesses, closes this anecdote not advocating violence on this individual President but subversively transferring the horizon of national identity to its illiterate citizens. She does this in order to counter what Donna Haraway has called “the informatics of domination”.20 using the misrecognitions of everyday life as the base of her national archive, Jacobs shows how national consciousness truly cuts a path through gossip, deliberate lies of the masters, the national press, the President of the United States who lives in Washington, the Queen of America who is dislocated from any specific capital, and the Queen of Justice who rules, perhaps in a universe parallel to that of the other Queen, and who has no national boundaries. In so creating this genealogy, this flow chart of power whose boundaries expand with every sentence written about America, Jacobs dislocates the nation from its intelligible forms. She opens up a space in which the national politics of corporeal identity becomes displayed on the monarchical body, and thus interferes with the fantasy norms of democratic abstraction; in so doing, she creates an American history so riddled with the misrecognitions of mass nationality that it is unthinkable in its typical form, as a narrative about sovereign subjects and their rational political representation. For no American president could be subordinate to any Queen—of America or of Justice. Bracketing that horizon of possibility, it becomes imperative to take up the scandalous promise of Jacobs’s strategy, which is to exploit a fantasy of cutting across the space that doesn’t exist, where abstract and corporeal citizenship come into contact not on the minoritized body but on the body of the nation.

It is this phantasmatic body that the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hear-
ings brought to us in the delusional week before the vote. It was alluded to in the corporeality of Thomas himself: in his alleged exploitation of personal collegiality in federal workspaces; in the racist fantasies that he evoked to account for his victimization by Hill and on the Hill; in the aura of the minority stereotype black authority represents as a “token” on the Supreme Court. The national body is signified in Hill’s own body as well, which displayed all of the decorums of bourgeois national polity while transgressing the veil between official and private behavior that grounds the erotic power of the state. Finally, the body of the nation was configured in the images of senators sitting in judgment and in the experts they brought in to testify to the law and to issues of “character” and “appearance.”

What I want to focus on is a displaced mediation of the national embodiment Hill and Thomas produced, in a television sitcom about the activities of a white and female-owned Southern business: the episode of Designing Women entitled “The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita” that aired shortly after the vote. In many ways, this episode reproduces the legitimacy of masculine speech over feminine embodiment in the political public sphere, most notably by contrasting news clips of speaking powerful men to clips that represent Hill only in tableau moments of demure silence before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thus in one light the show’s stifling of Hill reproduces a version of the imperial fantasy Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes, in which white women “heroically” save brown women from brown and white men. But while Hill herself demonstrated respect for national decorums and conservative ideologies of authority, her case substantially disrupted norms of embodiment of the national space and, indeed, revealed and produced disturbances in what counts as the national space itself.

In this episode, the characters share private opinions about Thomas and Hill, along with painful personal memories of sexual harassment; but under the pressure of historical circumstance, the ordinary space of intimacy they share comes into contact with a media frenzy: tee shirts they buy at the mall that say “He did it” or “She lied” turn their bodies into billboards, which they flash angrily at each other; opinion polls that register the micro-fluctuations of “public sentiment” generate conversation about linguistic bias and motivate assertions of their own superiority to the numerically represented “people”; CNN, reinstated as the source of national identity, transforms the undifferentiated stream of opinions from all over the country into national data as “official” as that emanating from
Washington itself; the television set focuses the collective gaze, such that
domestic and public spheres become merged, as do news and entertain-
ment (the character Julia Sugarbaker, for example, suggests that Thomas
belongs not on the Supreme Court, but in the National Repertory The-
atre); and, in the climactic moment, a local television reporter tapes an
interview with Suzanne Sugarbaker, a Thomas supporter, and Mary Jo
Shively, a self-described “feminist,” right in their living room. What’s
striking about the condensation of these media forms and forms of em-
bodying political intimacy is how close so many different and overlapping
American publics become—and in the context not of a soap opera but of a
situation comedy that refuses, this time, to contain the “situation” within
the frame of its half-hour. Judge Thomas and Professor Hill turn into
“Clarence” and “Anita” in this situation, like TV neighbors having a
domestic row; and the diverse, incorrect, passionate, and cynical range
of opinions that flow in the room take on the status of personal and politi-
cal gossip. Not just gossip about judges or senators without pants but
about the intimate details of national identity.

At one point Mary Jo explodes in rage at Senator John Danforth’s
claim, shown on CNN, that Anita Hill suffered from a delusional disease in
which she confused her own desire for power with the power of Thomas’s
sexual desire. Hearing Danforth’s pleasure in this pop-psych diagnosis
roused Mary Jo to call his office in Washington. But she is frustrated in
this desire because the line is busy. I myself wanted to call Washington
during Hill’s testimony or to testify in any way to my own banal/expert
knowledge of the nonconsensual erotics of power we code as “harass-
ment.” The desire for contact sometimes took the phantasmatic form of
a private letter to a senator, or one to a newspaper, sometimes a phone
encounter, sometimes a fantasy that a reporter from the national news
or “Nightline” would accost me randomly on the street and that my im-
promptu eloquence would instantly transport me to the televisual realm
of a Robert Bork, where my voice and body would be loud, personal,
national, and valorized.

In my view this ache to be an American diva was not about persua-
sion. It derived from a desire to enter a senator’s body and to dominate it
through an orifice he was incapable of fully closing, an ear or an eye. This
intimate fantasy communication aimed to provoke sensations in him for
which he was unprepared, those in that perverse space between empathy
and pornography that Karen Sánchez-Eppler has isolated as constitutive
of white Americans’ interest in slaves, slave narratives, and other testi-
monials of the oppressed. And in so appealing to a senator's authority over the terms in which I experience my (theoretically impossible) sexualized national being, I imagined making him so full and so sick with knowledge of what he has never experienced officially that he would lose, perhaps gratefully, his sensual innocence about—not the power of his own sexuality—but the sexuality of his own power, and...

This is where my fantasy of swearing out a female complaint would falter, stop knowing itself and what it wanted. The desire to go public, to exploit the dispersed media of national life, became my way of approximating the power of official nationality to dominate bodies—a motive which, in a relation of overidentification, I and many others had mapped onto Hill's majestic and courageous citizenship. It also suggested to me that the fantasy of addressing the nation directly, of violating the citizen's proper silence about the sensations of citizenship, is a fantasy that many Americans live.

The horizon of critical possibility lies, however, not in orchestrating mass culture and mass nationality through the pseudo-immediacy of "electronic town halls," currently offered as a solution to the problem of recovering representational politics as a kind of collective decision making in the United States. Diva Citizenship reminds us that the legal tender of contemporary politics is no longer calibrated according to a gold standard of immediacy, authenticity, and rationality; the bodily distortions and sensual intimacy of national media degrade representations of political agency and therefore bleed into a space of surprise where political experiments in re-imagining agency and critical practice itself can be located, perhaps among the kinds of queenly gestures and impulses toward freedom I have recorded here.

To close: the final narrative image of Designing Women, which merges a radical embodied female citizenship with the aura of the star system. Annie Potts, who plays Mary Jo Shively, wears Bette Davis drag. Dixie Carter, who plays Julia Sugarbaker, masquerades as Joan Crawford. Having come directly from a dress rehearsal of a local theatrical adaptation of What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? they sit on the couch, exhausted. They are not exhausted from the rehearsal, but from the rage they have expended on what they call this "day of [national] infamy." Meanwhile, their friends slow dance the night away, like pre-adolescents at a slumber party. Bette asks Joan to dance with her. They get up and look at each other. "Who should lead?" asks Bette Davis. "Well, Bette," says Joan Crawford, "considering who we are, I think we both should."
And who are they? As Joan says to Bette in an earlier moment, "two of the toughest talking big-shouldered broads ever to live in this country."

University of Chicago

Notes

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2. The word "experience" is important in the texts I am addressing and in the one I am writing here, and requires some explication. The category "experience" is not meant to refer to self-evident autobiographical data over which the experiencing person has control: the experience of being dominated, for example, is subjective, and therefore incompatible descriptions of it might engender legitimate contestation. But I take experience here more fundamentally to be something produced in the moment when an activity becomes framed as an event, such that the subject enters the empire of quotation
marks, anecdote, self-reflection, memory. More than a category of authenticity, "experience" in this context refers to something someone "has," in aggregate moments of self-estrangement. Jacobs, Harper, and Hill are aware of the unreliability of experience as data both in their own perceptions and in their drive to produce convincing evidence to buttress their arguments for social change or informed consciousness. For a strong summary of the current historicist argument over the evidentiary use of experience, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," Critical Inquiry 17 (Summer 1991): 773–97; and, more critically, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, "Theory Pedagogy Politics: The Crisis of 'The Subject' in the Humanities," in their collection Theory/Pedagogy/Politics: Texts for Change (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 1–32; and Chris Weedon, "Post-Structuralist Feminist Practice," in the same volume, 47–63. The phrase "the poetry of the future" comes, famously, from Karl Marx, The 18th Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte.

3 Frances E. W. Harper, Lola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted (1892; rpt., College Park, Md.: McGrath, 1969), 115–16. All further references will be contained in the text.


6 For the myriad transformations in legal theory and practical juridical norms regulating what counts as "injury" and "harm" to women, see At the Boundaries of Law: Feminism and Legal Theory, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Nancy Sweet Thomadsen (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender, ed. Katherine T. Bartlett and Roseanne Kennedy (Boulder: Westview, 1991).


11 On the counternarrative politics of gender and kinship in *Incidents*, see Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
15 The argument that rationality can overcome the fractures of race operates throughout Harper's speeches and poems as well. Perhaps the most condensed and eloquent of these was delivered at the Columbian Exposition. See "Woman's Political Future," in *The World's Congress of Representative Women*, ed. May Wright Sewall (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1894), 433–38.


19 I focus here on the analogy Harper seems to make between Esther’s complicated ethnic masquerade and Marie’s racial one, and on the conditions for political speech that ensued. The *Book of Esther* as a whole tells a far more complex story. On the one hand, it might have provided Harper, and us, with a less patriarchalized model of feminine power: Queen Vashti, whose refusal to display her royal beauty to a banquet of drunken courtiers provoked Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* to name her “the first woman recorded whose self-respect and courage enabled her to act contrary to the will of her husband. . . . (in) the first exhibition of individual sovereignty of woman on record. . . . true to the Divine aspirations of her nature” (86–88). On the other hand, the *Book of Esther* is a story about holocausts, a Jewish one averted and a Macedonian one revengefully executed by the Jews themselves (Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman’s Bible* [1898; rpt., Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974]).

20 Haraway, 161.


22 The original sentence, describing the mentality of “imperialist subject-production,” is “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988], 296).
