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"Women's Reality" and the Untold Story: *Designing Women* and the Revisioning of the Thomas/Hill Hearings

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"Women's Reality" and the Untold Story: Designing Women and the Revisioning of the Thomas/Hill Hearings

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Editor's Note: In this second of three essays about the Designing Women episode, Patricia A. Sullivan and Steven R. Goldzwig argue that the texture and multiple subplots in the script result in a "subversive televisual response" to the hearings. That is, the script was akin to a coded message that would lull the network and advertisers into seeing a superficially balanced message, while permitting that part of the viewership with the kind of White feminist sensibility closely matching Thomason-Bloodworth's own (the real "insiders?") to decode the "true" message.

The particularities of black female subordination are suppressed as the terms of racial and gender discrimination law require that we mold our experiences into that of either white women or black men in order to be legally recognized.

—Kimberle Crenshaw (1992, p. 404)

A *Time* magazine cover story, "Hollywood and Politics," observed that Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, creator of *Designing Women*, is "the closest thing TV has to an advocacy producer" (Zoglin, 1992, p. 47). Bloodworth-Thomason and her husband Harry Thomason produced the biographical film that introduced Bill Clinton at the Democratic National Convention in 1992. In the *Time* article, Bloodworth-Thomason defined her mission as a television producer and script writer. She remarked: "So-called serious newspeople miss the powerful potential of the entertainment forum as a means of influencing people's lives in a positive way. I have my own column on TV, and I take it as seriously as does Mike Royko or David Broder" (p. 47).

Bloodworth-Thomason, though, strongly disagrees with Dan Quayle's suggestion that the media are a bastion of liberal thought. She noted in the *Time* article: "Entertainment corporations are owned by old, white, conservative, rich men. The artists they employ are more liberal. The slant of what the artists are allowed to put out will be determined by the profit factor. The bottom line is money" (p. 47). As a successful television producer and the creator of current network television shows, Bloodworth-Thomason undoubtedly has more clout and, therefore, more latitude in choices she makes concerning programming. Regardless of her success, however, Bloodworth-Thomason still must "tow the line" in terms of the profit factor.

In the *Time* article, she implied that she faced the same types of constraints Anita Hill confronted when challenging "old, white, conservative, rich men." As an advocacy producer, Bloodworth-Thomason wanted to give voice to Hill and the women she represented—voices she believes have been marginalized by the dominant culture. "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" (first broadcast on November 4, 1991) was Bloodworth-Thomason's response to the Thomas/Hill hearings.¹ In an interview for *The New York Times*, she commented: "I'm no different from a lot of professional women. I was glued to the set for the hearings. And I felt it was another case of the oldboy network sending us women packing" (Carter, 1991, p. C15). Julia, a member of the *Designing Women* ensemble, seemed to speak for Bloodworth-Thomason in the episode and said: "The Old Boy network kicked in and we were sent packing." Furthermore, Bloodworth-Thomason referred to the script as her "valentine to all the women who felt Anita Hill was treated unfairly" (p. C15).

The opening scene of "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" involved all members of the *Designing Women* ensemble and previewed the web of subplots that dominated the episode. This scene was set in the home-like atmosphere of Sugarbaker's, the interior design office that served as a site for work and conversation in *Designing Women* episodes. Julia and Anthony discussed a stage adaptation of the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* that cast Julia and another member of the ensemble, Mary Jane, in the lead roles. Carlene entered and discussed a birthday slumber party for Allison. Although the adult Allison seemed "too old" for a slumber party, Carlene commented that Allison's wealthy parents did not recognize the importance of slumber parties. Mary Jo entered the scene and expressed concern about the Senate vote to confirm Clarence Thomas as a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. She noted that the Thomas/Hill situation was "making me nuts" and displayed her sentiments by wearing a "He did it" T-shirt. Political positions were defined as each speaker voiced views on the Thomas/Hill hearings. Carlene said Hill had a crush on Thomas. Julia

¹Our analysis is based on a videotape of the episode.

agreed with Mary Jo and defended Hill. Allison's addition to the scene provided a counterpoint to Mary Jo's position. Although Allison wore a "She lied" T-Shirt, she seemed more concerned about her slumber party than the hearings. However, she announced that a TV reporter had asked to interview her about her views on the hearings. Anthony expressed concern about Thomas's qualifications to sit on the Court. Comments by ensemble members were interspersed with documentary footage of the hearings and the Senate vote. This part of the episode ended with the Senate vote and Julia's observation that "All men are created equal."

Part II of the episode began with a rehearsal for *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*. Julia played the role of Blanche (the role played by Joan Crawford in the film) and Mary Jo played the role of Baby Jane (the role played by Bette Davis in the film). Julia and Mary Jo, Hill's defenders, left rehearsal and drove to Allison's for the slumber party. The conversation in the car was reminiscent of conversations in the film *Thelma and Louise*. Just as Thelma and Louise expressed outrage concerning reality as defined by men, so did Julia and Mary Jo. They arrived at the slumber party in their Blanche and Baby Jane costumes; a television reporter prepared to interview Allison about the hearings. Allison supported Thomas, but Mary Jo seized the microphone and demanded to be heard. Mary Jo revealed her outrage and evoked the personae of Thelma and Louise as well as the persona of Howard Beal ("the mad prophet of the airways") from the film *Network*. As she chanted a list of grievances experienced by women in U.S. culture, she became a female "mad prophet of the airways." Mary Jo wondered if she "blew it." Julia (Blanche) and Mary Jo (Baby Jane) danced and both decided to "lead."

The episode concluded with footage of President George Bush congratulating Thomas after he was sworn in as a Court justice. However, the final slice of footage showed the bowed head of Anita Hill at the hearings.

Bloodworth-Thomason did resonate with women who were outraged by the hearings. On the other hand, in meeting the demands of commercial television for balance, she created a polysemic televisual text inviting a number of interpretations. A polysemic text permits audiences, based on their frames of reference, to bring different meanings to their viewing experiences.² After providing a brief overview of *Designing Women* as a television show that targets women and their concerns, this chapter examines three potential viewer "readings" that suggest quite different responses to the hearings. A theoretical framework based on nonlinear and linear narratives is established for analyzing two of these

²Fiske (1986) argues that polysemic texts are open to a range of interpretations and invite audiences to negotiate and resist dominant ideologies concerning race, class, and gender.

interpretations. In order to “make sense” of a nonlinear narrative, a viewer turns to extratextual clues. For example, a viewer responding to “The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita” could “make sense” of the episode by relying on her or his responses to the hearings. On the other hand, a linear structure encourages viewers to interpret the narrative based solely on material presented in the text. The viewer’s responses to the hearings are irrelevant from this standpoint. The first interpretation highlights White feminist responses. As an advocacy producer—from her privileged standpoint as a White feminist—Bloodworth-Thomason generated a nonlinear “universalist or essentialist” narrative in which Anita Hill was deraced.³ Her experiences stood for women in general rather than African-American women; under this interpretation the problematic intersections of gender and race were erased.⁴ The second interpretation—based on a linear reading of the narrative—calls into question Hill’s veracity and suggests that “she lied.” The final interpretation—an oppositional reading of the narrative—foregrounds Hill’s experiences as an African-American woman bringing charges of sexual harassment. Finally, we explore the significance of powerful televisual narratives in educating the public about complicated legal issues such as sexual harassment.

DESIGNING WOMEN AND THE FEMALE AUDIENCE

In a recent issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Bonnie Dow (1992) provides a provocative analysis of “The Performance of Feminine Discourse in *Designing Women*.” Dow argues that *Designing Women* “blurs

³Deraced is a term borrowed from Crenshaw (1992, p. 407).

⁴Crenshaw (1992) stated: “My argument here is that one consequence of the feminist movement’s tendency to think about gender and power dynamics in terms of what we might call a universalist or essentialist form is that it depicts the structural forms that gender power plays in the white community as representing gender pure and simple” (p. 407). Julia Wood (1992) provides an excellent overview of the “essentialist or universalist” controversy. She notes that feminists who embrace essentialism or universalism “want to reinscribe woman’s traditional identity and reclaim and value what traditionally has been associated with women” (p. 6). These feminists claim “that because women are alike in important ways, ‘women’ or ‘woman’ is a legitimate designation” (p. 6). However, Wood also observes: “Despite implicit and explicit arguments for a unified concept of women, a majority of theorists contend this essentialized view creates more problems than it solves. They advocate problematizing the concept of woman to emphasize the enormous diversity among women and to explode long-standing and long-confining monolithic models of women” (p. 7); see also hooks, 1981, 1989, 1990; Houston, 1992; Spelman, 1988.

distinctions between public discourse and the often devalued 'private talk' of women" (p. 125). She suggests that the show "challenges patriarchal definitions and attitudes" and offers possibilities for empowering female viewers who "join in" the show's narratives. The "private talk" of women—characterized by female-associated narrative patterns—becomes public and validated through enactment during the show's episodes.

"The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" provides a special case study that enables the feminist critic to transcend the characteristics identified by Dow. Although Dow's analysis accounts for particular narrative dimensions of this episode, her analysis can be extended by generating explanatory power concerning the nonlinear juxtaposition of narrative threads in "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita." Seemingly disparate narrative threads coalesce to raise important questions about the hearings.

Indeed, we argue that although "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" employed a number of narrative strategies that viewers of *Designing Women* had come to expect, the episode also added new twists to those strategies. To capture the sense of "another case of the oldboy network sending us women packing," Bloodworth-Thomason engaged in exaggeration—hyperbolic nonlinear narrative strategies—intended to capture the absurdity of the Thomas/Hill hearings. By interweaving Hill's story with the stories of fictional film characters who had faced ridicule for challenging the status quo, Bloodworth-Thomason urged viewers to examine their responses to the hearings. When the episode jumped from Hill's "real" story to fictional film stories, viewers were asked to reflect on truth-telling and the hearings. Prompted by the nonlinear narrative structure, viewers might have asked: Who lied or created fictions during the hearings?

Four "stories within stories"—"plays within plays"—constitute kernels that define the central theme of the nonlinear narrative. Because "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" is a polysemic text, the linear and nonlinear "sense makings" or interpretations of the text vary dramatically.

LINEAR AND NONLINEAR NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS

Scholars have identified a number of characteristics associated with the ways women tell their stories (Hall & Langellier, 1988; Kalčík, 1975; Langellier, 1989; Taylor, 1990). Presnell (1989) concludes from his summary of research on narrative gender differences that women and men tell fundamentally different stories. The male-associated way of storytelling—the linear approach to storytelling—has been viewed as the norm. When narrative is defined in a linear manner, discourse is considered narrative only if it is "perceived as providing connections between episodes of communicative expression" (pp. 120-121). The male pattern of

storytelling is associated with written communication. The linear narrative provides a clear structure of meaning—a clear beginning, middle, and ending. In E. T. Hall's (1977) terms, these narratives are low-context message systems. Expectations concerning traditional narrative guide the interpretations of such self-contained stories; minimal contextual clues are needed to interpret a story constructed in this manner (Presnell, 1989).

Female-associated patterns of communication, on the other hand, are associated with oral communication. These narratives are not linear, but episodic; they are not structured around a clear beginning, middle, and ending development. Langellier (1989) and Kalčík (1975) have mapped the logic in these episodic narratives by identifying "kernel stories" that structure the larger narrative (Presnell, 1989, pp. 125-126). Kernel stories elaborate the narrative's theme from different points of view. In order to "make sense" out of such a high-context message system, an interpreter must bring extratextual clues to the discourse. This type of narrative will not make sense if it is extracted solely from the context of its performance. As Presnell observes, "Oral discourse presents us with a collection of episodes that circle back on one another depending on the context of interpretation" (p. 126).

Furthermore, literary critic Rachel Blau Du Plessis (1985) has proposed that women "write beyond the ending," constructing episodic narratives to subvert traditional patriarchal story lines associated with women's lives:

Narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the "natural" and "fantastic" meanings by which we live. Here are produced and disseminated the assumptions, the conflicts, the patterns that create fictional boundaries for experience. . . . Indeed, these are issues very acute to certain feminist critics and women writers, with their senses of the untold story, the other side of a well-known tale, the elements of women's existence that have never been revealed. (p. 3)

In negotiating ways to tell their stories "that have never been told," women have turned to narratives that reflect their life experiences and challenge the ways women have been named as characters in patriarchal narratives.

The content of these high-context "stories that have never been told" differs markedly from the content of low-context stories. These episodic stories may not center on a climax or "a remarkable event or action" (Langellier, 1989; Taylor, 1990, p. 21). From a traditional linear, narrative point of view, only stories chronicling noble actions are worth telling; however, women's high-context episodic narratives may focus on everyday or mundane occurrences. These narratives privilege female experiences—experiences that have been marginalized by patriarchal society.

In sum, women, in telling "the other side of a well-known tale," generate episodic, nonlinear, high-context narratives that rely on their audiences to create meaning by turning to extratextual clues to fill in textual gaps. Such narratives require an "active connectedness" between storyteller and interpreter, between text and audience.

LINEAR AND NONLINEAR INTERPRETATIONS OF "THE STRANGE CASE OF CLARENCE AND ANITA"

"The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" requires this active connectedness between storyteller and interpreter—at least when the episode is viewed as nonlinear and episodic. For the viewer approaching "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" as a linear narrative, other interpretations might emerge. Because Bloodworth-Thomason has made her views on the Thomas/Hill hearings known, and she is "an advocacy producer," we assume that the episode was designed to defend Anita Hill and other women who have been in similar circumstances.

Because "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" sent out "mixed messages," however, Bloodworth-Thomason still met requirements imposed by the network expectations concerning balance. As Kathryn C. Montgomery (1986) argues in *Target Prime Time: Advocacy Groups and the Struggle Over Entertainment Television*, the notion of "balance" in "offering various points of view" has become a "marketing strategy."

Our analysis of "stories within stories"—the kernels that bind the nonlinear narrative in "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita"—suggests a truly subversive televisual response to the Thomas/Hill hearings. A discursive or linear interpretation of this episode, in contrast, suggests quite a different reading. Considering that the target audience for *Designing Women* is women—primarily women in the baby boom generation—we assume Bloodworth-Thomason expected many viewers to "fill in the blanks" in a nonlinear manner. However, the network standards and practices representatives—many of them male—would bring a discursive and linear interpretation to the episode and consider it acceptable and "balanced."

A linear discursive interpretation of "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" might unfold in this manner. A low-context message approach to this episode would suggest balance. Initially, the more intelligent and accomplished women seemed to be the ones serving as advocates for Anita Hill. The episode opened just as members of the Senate were preparing to vote on the Thomas confirmation. Julia and Mary Jo (wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with "He Did It") expressed their frustration concerning the patriarchal proceedings and the muting of Hill's voice. They emphasized that those Senators "just don't get it."

Two other members of the female ensemble, Carlene and Allison, served as advocates for Thomas. Carlene, to put it mildly, was not portrayed as an intellectual; she muses, "I guess I was harassed at Ray Flaghorn's Ozark Furniture." The owner wanted to "test" mattresses with her. When she told the story, she implied that such harassment was "simply the way of the world." Allison's natural attitudes concerning patriarchal frameworks and their legitimacy was reflected in her choice of pink clothing, including a T-shirt proclaiming: "She lied."⁵

At this point, the lines seemed to be drawn; the more "self-aware" and "brighter" women believed Hill; the less "self-aware" and less "intelligent" women believed Thomas. These interpretations were complicated by the "stories within stories." This episode contained four stories within stories; viewers from linear and nonlinear perspectives might have made quite different intertextual links.

The most important "story within a story"—the community theater performance—had the potential to be interpreted in a number of different ways. Julia and Mary Jo were rehearsing to perform in a stage adaptation of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*. From a linear discursive perspective, Baby Jane was crazy. She never grew up; she tormented her sister Blanche. As the "eternal brat," Baby Jane's character seemed to parallel behavior that someone like Phyllis Schlafly would term *strident feminism*. From this perspective, Baby Jane was a contradiction in terms; having never grown up, she wore a dress suited for an 8-year-old. Although her dress was "soft," her manner was hard. A simplistic reading of Baby Jane suggests that "she's crazy." Her sister, Blanche, on the other hand, was the long-suffering sister who had cared for "Baby Jane." The portrayals of Jane and Blanche, however, had an additional textual overlay. In the film, these roles were played by two "tough" actresses, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. As Mary Jo and Julia took on the roles of Jane and Blanche, they also assumed the personae of Davis and Crawford.

When a nonlinear episodic reading is brought to the *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* kernel, quite a different interpretation emerges. For viewers familiar with the film, Jane might not have appeared quite so crazy. The film brings to mind the story of the Thomas/Hill Hearings as well as a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899/1973). Each of these stories feature women who played patriarchal games—remade themselves into patriarchal images—and ultimately discovered that their voices could not be heard when they no longer fit those images. These women, who saw patterns in the wallpaper, were madwomen in society's attic.

"Baby Jane" and Blanche both made themselves in the images of women provided by men. "I've Written a Letter to Daddy" was Baby Jane Hudson's signature song as a child star; the song drifted through the mind of

⁵Natural attitude is a term borrowed from Schutz and Luckmann (1973).

the middle-aged woman who "grew up" and was no longer "cute." Baby Jane was not what she appeared to be. Blanche also wrote her history in patriarchal terms; as an adult she became a film star and patterned her image after patriarchal studio expectations. Although the public believed that Jane was crazy and drove a car over her sister, crippling her for life, ultimately Blanche confessed that she and not Jane was responsible for the accident. The story corresponded with Jane's madness and had been perpetuated by the studio to protect Blanche's career. Blanche supported the studio's version of the accident and exercised power over Jane by playing on her guilt. In this scenario, Blanche emerged as being as "crazy" as Jane. They were both "crazy"—both madwomen—because they had molded themselves in terms of patriarchal images.

Furthermore, a more sophisticated nonlinear reading leads to other interpretations as the kernels coalesce. Clearly Bette Davis and Joan Crawford were depicted as "hard women"—women who did not live up to patriarchal frameworks for women. They were not really women.

Additionally, when Julia and Mary Jo made the decision to attend Allison's slumber party (a stereotypic activity for "girls") in character (as Jane/Bette and Blanche/Joan), other kernels merged to further complicate an episodic nonlinear reading of "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita." When Mary Jo/Jane/Bette and Julia/Blanche/Joan drove to Allison's house for the slumber party, Thelma and Louise intertextualized the narrative. As Mary Jo and Julia drove along, they echoed the sentiments of Thelma and Louise in suggesting that they simply would not live by patriarchal norms. Mary Jo and Julia, of course, would eventually have to shed their costumes and return to the patriarchal world.

After Mary Jo and Julia arrived for the slumber party, Allison was interviewed by a local television reporter who asked her to explain her support for Thomas. Mary Jo (as Jane) interrupted Allison and expressed the outrage that many women felt during the hearings. From a linear perspective she seemed crazy; from a nonlinear perspective she seemed to represent what women have been driven to in a patriarchal world. She spoke for Thelma and Louise when she screamed in frustration and said, "What I'm going to do is get in my car and drive to the center of the U.S." She also said, "Who do you men think you are?" As Mary Jo/Jane/Bette expressed her outrage, yet another kernel was woven into the narrative; her oration played on the angry litany ("I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore") of Howard Beal from the film *Network*. Although a television executive labeled Beal "the mad prophet of the airways," a viewer of the film could have questioned if the prophet was actually crazy. His warnings concerning government and media corruption "made sense" just as Mary Jo's statements concerning the marginalization of women in United States culture "made sense." A highly contextual nonlinear reading thus suggests that Mary Jo, Julia, Bette, Joan, Thelma, and Louise were not crazy. They

were simply madwomen driven to the attic by oppressive patriarchal standards.

One final kernel emerges as significant in a high context nonlinear reading of this text—the documentary footage of the Thomas/Hill Hearings. When footage from the Thomas/Hill hearings was added and counterpointed with the “madness” of Mary Jo, Julia, Bette, Joan, Thelma, and Louise, the no-win, double-bind situations of women were foregrounded. We saw footage of Anita Hill—the bright composed professional conservative woman—facing her interrogators. We were reminded that John Danforth, a primary defender of Thomas, identified “a special disorder” that plagued women like Hill. Arlen Specter charged Hill with perjury. Alan Simpson suggested that Hill was fantasizing.

The episode closed with the formal ceremony installing Thomas as a member of the Supreme Court and Bush’s statement that “All men are created equal” and a return to the highly credible professional Hill with her head bowed. The stories within stories were woven together to suggest that Hill was viewed as being every bit as crazy as Jane, Bette, Joan, Thelma, and Louise. Women just cannot win; when they question patriarchal reality, they will be branded madwomen. As Dale Spender (1985) notes in *Man Made Language*, “When one has the power to name, it appears that one can structure almost any reality without undue interference from the evidence” (p. 176).

As a producer and the creator of network television shows, Bloodworth-Thomason “has the power to name,” as long as she keeps in mind the “balance” notion and “the profit factor.” Therefore, she generated “The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita,” a complex narrative open to a range of nonlinear and linear interpretations. Viewers had the option to fill in narrative gaps in a variety of ways; however, the reality of Hill as an African-American woman bringing charges of sexual harassment was eclipsed. For viewers who brought an awareness of the deracing of Hill to this episode, another interpretation—an oppositional interpretation—might have emerged.

OPPOSITIONAL DECODING AND MARGINALIZED VOICES

An issue of *The Black Scholar* (Winter 1991; see especially Hull, 1991; Jordan, 1991; Malveaux, 1991) and a collection of essays, *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992), edited by Toni Morrison, identified the African-American perspectives that were missing from mainstream media coverage of the hearings. Although essays in these collections do not address the *Designing Women* episode, the dominance of the White feminist perspective in media coverage is highlighted. Bloodworth-Thomason’s valentine for women represents one manifestation of this White feminist perspective.

In filling in textual gaps while viewing "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita," an African-American woman might have engaged in resistive interpretive strategies. A number of feminist critics have offered suggestions for reading against texts that do not "take female experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs into account" (Dobris, 1989, p. 149). These suggestions also could prove valuable for reading against texts that do not take into account African-American experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Patrocínio P. Schweickart (1986) notes that "androcentric literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not allow the woman reader to seek refuge in her difference. Instead, it draws her into a process that uses her against herself" (p. 42). A dominant White feminist interpretation of the hearings, as manifested in Bloodworth-Thomason's episode, refused to permit African-American women "to seek refuge" in their different responses to the hearings.

Linda Steiner (1988) recommends the development of resistive reading (viewing) practices in response to media messages that marginalize the voices of women and people of color. She argues that marginalized voices must read (view) against what Stuart Hall (1980a, 1980b) refers to as "the preferred readings" or the readings suggested by dominant culture. In the case of the *Designing Women* episode, this required an additional oppositional reading—one directed against dominant White feminist culture. Oppositional readings give voice to marginalized or muted interpretations. Steiner explains that readers of *Ms.* magazine, who submitted offensive advertisements and clippings from a range of media sources for republication in the "No Comment" feature, were engaging in oppositional decoding. These readers refused to embrace "the preferred readings."

Teresa De Lauretis (1984) offers additional ideas for resistive reading. In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism Semiotics Cinema*, De Lauretis provides suggestions for reading against hegemonic cinematic texts. She identifies two approaches for interpreting the cinematic text. When viewers approach a film through the lens of the dominant code, they fill in "gaps"—the nonlinear or linear interpretation of "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita." When viewers approach a film through the lens of the muted or marginalized code, they seek "borders" (p. 99). "Gaps" demand that viewers visualize "preferred readings"; "borders," on the other hand, invite viewers to visualize alternative readings. De Lauretis notes: "Borders are not gaps. . . . Borders stand for the potentially conflictual copresence of different cultures, desires, contradictions, which they articulate or delineate" (p. 99).

When viewers search for "borders," they reject "preferred readings" and ask whether a text speaks to their experiences. Steiner (1988) argues that "resistive reading" serves an important consciousness-raising function. Resistive reading permits muted groups to define themselves and their concerns:

Most centrally, the activity gives hope and meaning to experiences, symbolically marking the group's normative boundaries and reconfirming its convictions and commitments. The group must demarcate its world view from that of the dominant culture. (p. 11)

She also suggests that "resistive reading" serves a vital role in bringing about social change. Because "dominant mass media do ideological work," she argues that "mainstream content must be contested" (p. 13).

We believe similarly that Bloodworth-Thomason's valentine must be contested. The *Designing Women* episode, in keeping with the dominant white feminist position, overlooked complex intersections of race and gender in the Hill/Thomas hearings. Although African Americans do not speak with a monolithic voice, a number of commentaries on the hearings emphasize that they evoked fundamentally different responses from White and Black audiences.

RESISTIVE READING AND "THE STRANGE CASE OF CLARENCE AND ANITA"

From the standpoint of many African-American women, two factors seemed especially important in defining the hearings. The first factor begins with the proposition that Hill, by bringing accusations against Thomas, was considered a traitor to her race. The history of shared suffering associated with slavery suggested that Black women and men should remain united against White oppressors. The second factor—particularly relevant from the standpoint of Bloodworth-Thomason's White feminist perspective—centered on "the painful division between antiracism and feminism [that] goes back to the days of turmoil and hope after the Civil War" (Stansell, 1992, p. 251).

Manning Marable (1992) argues that Hill was viewed as a traitor in that many African Americans embraced Thomas's cause because he served as a powerful "symbolic representation" to inspire "millions of less fortunate African Americans" (p. 74). When Thomas portrayed himself as the victim of a "high-tech lynching," he relied on a "useful trope" that "allowed him to occupy the position of the race" (Painter, 1992, p. 204). By framing his story using the lynching trope, he became "the black man, against an army of powerful white assailants. Democratic senators became the lynch mob; Thomas became the innocent lynch victim. As symbol and as actual person, Anita Hill was no longer to be found" (p. 205).

Hill simply had no place in the narrative as framed by Thomas. The "lynching trope" permitted Thomas to play on the guilt of the White Senators on the Judiciary Committee. Although Thomas had a reliable trope

to call on in telling his story—one in which he became "a man unjustly accused"—Hill did not have access to a comparable trope (Painter, 1992). Hill lacked the resources to transform her story into one that would be readily understood by the Judiciary Committee or the public. Painter notes that Hill had a limited number of storylines open to her—none of them promising in terms of presenting her case. In her appearances before the Judiciary Committee, she had open to her the following roles: "Mammy, welfare cheat, Jezebel, period. These were the roles available to Anita Hill. Hill chose not to make herself into a symbol Americans could recognize, and as a result she seemed to disappear, a fate reserved for black women who are well educated and thus doubly hard to see" (p. 211). When Painter says that "silence and invisibility are the hallmarks of black women in the imagery of American life" (p. 211), she echoes a "core theme in Black feminist thought" that African-American women are "the mules of the world" (Collins, 1991, p. 43).⁶

Kim Taylor (1993) addresses "silence and invisibility" as it relates to the second point that was relevant for many African Americans—the divisions between antiracism and feminism. She claims the Judiciary Committee hearings "were emblematic of society's inability to recognize and appreciate the double oppression of race and gender" (p. 449). Furthermore, Taylor notes that the White feminist perspective frequently oversimplified Hill's situation by overlooking "the interplay of gender and race" (p. 450). Hill faced special difficulties in speaking out against a Black man:

Many who acknowledged the difficulty of finding the courage as a victim of sexual harassment overlooked the additional measure of strength that Professor Hill needed to summon in order to speak those words against an African American man. Having been raised in a tradition that taught her not to "air dirty laundry in public," Professor Hill did not violate that directive lightly. Yet many white feminists seemed, at best, unaware of or, worse, insensitive to the painful reality that speaking out could alienate Professor Hill from her African American community. (p. 450)

Hill, speaking at a conference on "Race, Gender and Power in America" at Georgetown University Law School one year after the hearings, expressed frustration concerning her treatment by the Senate Judiciary Committee and the media. She recognized that members of the Senate and the press had no way to "make sense" out of her situation as an African-American woman charging sexual harassment. During her appearance before

⁶Collins (1991) explains that many African-American feminists have borrowed the term "mules of the world" from Hurston's (1937/1978) novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As Collins notes: "As dehumanized objects, mules are living mechanisms and can be treated as part of the scenery" (p. 43).

the Senate Judiciary Committee, Hill said she realized she was a mystery to many observers because "not only did the Senate fail to understand or recognize me because of my lack of attachment to certain institutions, like marriage and patronage, they failed to relate to my race, my gender, my race and gender combined, and in combination with my education, my career choice and my demeanor" (quoted in Barringer, 1992, p. A6).

Such accounts suggest that the hearings constituted fundamentally different interpretive experiences for many audience members. An African-American viewer engaged in reading against the preferred meanings of "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" might ask the following questions in seeking "borders" in the text. What role did the intersection of race and gender play in the hearings? (The viewer could speculate that the presence of a Black woman accusing a Black man changed the dynamics of the hearings.) What role did race play in Bloodworth-Thomason's framing of the episode? (A resistive reader could note that Bloodworth-Thomason's episode overlooked race by concentrating on the responses of White women.) What role did gender play in Bloodworth-Thomason's framing of the episode? (A viewer could observe that a focus on gender oversimplified the dynamics of the hearings.) What was the significance of the mixed messages generated in the episode? (A resistive respondent could ask whether race played a role in the mixed messages.) What was the significance of the "crazy" White women? (The viewer might ask whether the experiences of Black women could resonate with the experiences of the "crazy" White women.) What role did Anthony (a regular African-American member of the *Designing Women* ensemble) play in the episode? (A viewer could argue that Anthony's responses as an African-American man received inadequate attention.) What was the significance of the "deracing" that occurred in the episode? (The viewer could point out the African-American experiences that were missing or marginalized in the episode.) How did *Designing Women* normally address issues of race? Issues of race and gender? Was this episode consistent with *Designing Women's* approach to issues of race and gender? (The last group of questions concerning race and gender could prompt a resistive reader to suggest that this episode of a mainstream television show was typical in its treatment of issues of race and gender. African-American voices are marginalized on mainstream television shows unless their concerns dovetail with White concerns.)

Thus, if viewers brought these questions to the episode, quite different interpretations could emerge than the ones gleaned from a focus on nonlinear and linear narrative conventions. As a powerful advocacy producer, Bloodworth-Thomason acknowledges her efforts to construct subversive narratives. Her subversive narrative, "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita," however, played to the concerns of the White feminist voices that were dominant during the hearings. The narrative also

unwittingly displaced the connections between gender and race and, therefore, for some audiences (African-American females) brought marginalization where it sought empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

As an advocacy producer, Bloodworth-Thomason negotiates a narrow path on commercial television by bridging audiences that bring linear and nonlinear readings to narratives. She has "the power to name" on commercial television and is exercising her influence in "telling the untold stories" of women. A sophisticated reading of "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" suggests that Bloodworth-Thomason is subverting powerful patriarchal narratives. "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" is an open-ended episodic narrative. We sense that Bloodworth-Thomason will continue to "write beyond the ending."

Bloodworth-Thomason's role in creating powerful televisual narratives also raises other questions. Bloodworth-Thomason carved out a voice for a mainstream White feminist perspective that treats women as essentially the same—regardless of race and class. Although we recognize the constraints imposed by commercial television, her success in finding a voice for this perspective on commercial television holds promise for future producers and writers. Bloodworth-Thomason, in her position as a powerful producer and writer, has the power to assist other marginalized voices in bringing their stories to commercial television. She need not become simply the White feminist counterpart of the "old, white, conservative, rich men" she derided in the *Time* article.

Bloodworth-Thomason's "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" offered the promise that the popular and the political could intersect to encourage people to reflect on issues. As Dow (1992) points out, "perhaps very little commercial television programming projects uncompromised feminist content, but that does not mean that critics should refuse to recognize the potential for texts to function in progressive ways, even when hampered by hegemonic elements" (p. 143). All texts demand some type of oppositional reading; we measure our experiences against the experiences provided in a narrative. Commercial televisual texts, due to their tendency to rely on hegemonic stock story lines, demand special vigilance on the part of viewers. Critical viewers should attend to the ideological bent of such texts. It is precisely when we feel like "insiders" as audience members—as though our world views have been stroked and validated—that we must make special efforts to analyze "mainstream" television programming.

One final point merits attention. The Hill/Thomas hearings served as

the departure point for the public's education about the law and sexual harassment. The hearings preempted most regular television programming from October 11-14, 1991, and drew attention to what had been a muted female reality. Interviews with experts, such as law professor Catharine MacKinnon, explored and legitimated this female reality. Women exchanged stories concerning their experiences and engaged in conversations similar to the ones portrayed on *Designing Women*. Through the hearings and television coverage of the hearings, women acquired the power to name their sexual harassment experiences.⁷ A reality that had been silent and invisible was named. However, we must keep in mind that "the soundtrack of a white-feminist agenda" (Burnham, 1992, p. 312) oversimplified the hearings and sexual harassment law. Burnham (1992) provides an example to illustrate that, in pushing their own agenda, White feminists failed to understand the complex intersections of race and gender during the hearings:

Some feminist commentators who were featured in the media perhaps unwittingly fed into this sense that it was feminists against blacks. When, for example, Tom Brokaw asked Catharine MacKinnon whether sexual harassers tend to be repeat offenders, she answered, "Well, I hate to put it this way but he's not dead yet." She clearly was not thinking about how that might sound to a black woman in small-town Georgia—the constituency that mattered here more than any other. Blacks hearing white feminists speak that way about the nominee were more likely to credit the GOP claim that Anita Hill was being used; Hill, an intelligent black woman, would not, of her own volition, seek to kill or "lynch" a black man. She therefore had to be a pawn. (p. 313)

We must wait for the commercial televisual elaboration of more difficult questions surrounding sexual harassment—such as the intersection of race and gender issues. The reality of Anita Hill, an African-American woman bringing sexual harassment charges against an African-American man, remains silent and invisible.

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⁷Conservative commentators credit media coverage with shifts in opinion polls from 1991 to 1992. In 1991, women and men polled indicated that they believed Thomas. By 1992, women indicated that they believed Hill (see Garment, 1993, and "What a difference a year makes," 1993).

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