

Responses to Barbara Smith's Call to Awareness

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While reading Barbara's letter I remembered what I thought as I watched the Senate panel interrogating Anita Hill about her experience of Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment. I thought, there is something deeply flawed in this process when an all-white panel of men decided it will determine whether a Black woman is telling the truth. They put her in an untenable position: to publicly reveal her truth before white America would clearly be experienced as a profound betrayal of Black men by a substantial portion of the Black community.

So in this context I thought to myself how would I respond to Barbara's letter and what would I want to say to other white men about those responses?

First I notice that there are so many possibilities for responding in ways that consolidate my white male heterosexual privilege. Then I note that she has broken a fundamental unspoken tenet governing relations between members of dominant and subordinate groups. It states that men (in this case) may comment on women in or out of their presence, privately or publicly, while women may not comment in men publicly or in men's presence. Historically, oppressed groups have been lynched, raped, and gassed by the dominant group for telling the truth – or for just being. So will I respond by labeling her, using inflammatory and homophobic terms like "raging" and "man-hating" to dismiss her? Will I criticize her position as not being "balanced" or not acknowledging men (such as myself) who are working to challenge men's sexism? Will I isolate her by seeking out other women who will be willing, preferably in her presence, to take a more male-identified position? Will I blame her for my discomfort and exact reassurance from other women who, as I see it, "appreciate" and "care for" men? Will I exempt myself from her depiction of violent men and say nothing? And so on . . .

These are all choices that would align me with the Senate panel. When I question her validity instead of attempting to gain an awareness of the "actual texture and challenges of women's day-to-day lives." I'm choosing to establish and maintain my white male privilege.

What, minimally, other white men and I can do is *believe* her. Hear what seems to be her anger and isolation. Work to figure out the parts we've played in angering and isolating her. And work to change the conditions that oppress her. We can, if we acknowledge the racism and homophobia we bring to the encounter, also challenge her Black brother on his sexism. Respectfully breaking that silence is an essential first step towards justice-making for women and away from the privileged location of the Senate panel.