

VOLUME XX, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2020

# CLAREMONT

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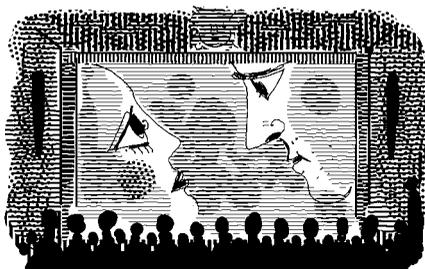
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## SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



# A Mouthful of Bees

**I**N 2007, LONG AFTER MANY AMERICANS had quit trying to control their emotions, the cultural commentator Peter Wood published a book with the imaginative title *A Bee in the Mouth*, which contrasted the older virtue of self-mastery by which Americans kept their anger in check, with a new cult of self-expression by which they spewed rage as aggressively as possible. (I realize this is the second “Shadow Play” in a row that I have devoted to the topic of anger. Blame it on social distancing.) This title came to mind while watching *Created Equal: Clarence Thomas in His Own Words*, a new documentary from Washington-based filmmaker Michael Pack, because, in its low-key way, the film is very much about the centuries-long struggle of African Americans to hold their stinging, buzzing fury behind gritted teeth, lest it fly out and destroy them.

Unlike most film biographies, *Created Equal* does not fill the screen with an agglomeration of talking heads, all vying to pin the tail on the same donkey. Instead, there are only two speakers, Thomas and his wife, Virginia. The film opens on the Associate Justice, dressed in business attire and seated in one of those shadowy interiors meant to focus attention on the illuminated personage facing the camera. But this stiff, formal set-up is warmed by the following exchange:

Michael Pack (off camera, to the cinematographer, James Callanan): “James, are we keeping the glasses on or off? Does it matter?”

Callanan (behind the camera): “The only issue is that because they’re bifocals there’s a line going through his eyes.”

Pack (to Thomas): “Do you need them on, Justice Thomas?”

Thomas (removing his glasses): “No. I wear them, that’s my normal...I normally have glasses on—”

Pack (mischievously): “Yes, but not on the cover of your book.”

Thomas (laughing): “Well, except for the cover of my book!”

### Discussed in this essay:

*Created Equal: Clarence Thomas in His Own Words*, directed by Michael Pack. Manifold Productions (Airs on PBS Monday, May 18. Available via streaming and on DVD after the broadcast.)

*My Grandfather’s Son: A Memoir*, by Clarence Thomas. Harper, 304 pages, \$26.95 (cloth), \$17.99 (paper)

Pack (not missing a beat): “Justice Thomas, how did you decide you wanted to become a lawyer?”

Full disclosure: my husband and I have known Michael Pack and his wife and business partner, Gina, for almost as long as they have been making films, and apart from a criticism or two, I have always admired their work for its timeliness, spirit, and inventiveness. But in this case, my admiration goes further. *Created Equal* is one of the most moving, fascinating, compelling film biographies I have seen.

### Images of Childhood

**U**NLIKE WRITTEN BIOGRAPHIES, which are built on words (and there are always more words), film biographies are built on images. But for those of us born before the invention of the digital camera, the supply of images from childhood and youth is rarely large enough to sustain a two-hour film. This is especially true of Justice Thomas, whose first six years (he was born in 1948) were spent in Pinpoint, Georgia, a tiny hamlet nestled among the marshes and estuaries southeast of Savannah. As Thomas writes in his 2007 autobiography, *My Grandfather’s Son*, the roughly 100 residents of Pinpoint, “most of whom were related to me in one way or another,” were engaged in “a daily struggle for the barest of essentials: food, clothing, and shelter.” It is unlikely that they owned many cameras.

Thomas comes from the distinctive ethnic group known as Geechee (or Gullah), descendants of enslaved West Africans who once labored on the rice, indigo, and cotton plantations of the eastern Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Today, Geechee culture is celebrated for its many African retentions, from music to food, handicrafts to language. But as Thomas recalls, almost all the people he knew growing up were uneducated, and many were illiterate. And while colorful and unique, the Geechee language is a creole that most Americans, black and white, find “difficult to understand.”

Yet in spite of isolation and hardship, the people of Pinpoint were proud, hard-working, and as self-sufficient as it was possible for them to be. For the children, Thomas observes in his book, life was “idyllic.” Together with his brother, Myers, and assorted cousins, young

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Clarence “skipped oyster shells on the water,” “caught minnows in the creeks,” “rolled old automobile tires and bicycle rims along the sandy roads,” “played with ‘trains’ made out of empty juice cans strung together with old coat hangers and weighted with sand,” and “made gunlike toys called ‘pluffers’ out of canes and wooden mop or broom handles, using green chinaberries as ammunition.”

To represent visually this mix of hardship and idyll in the absence of family photos must have been a challenge. But the film meets it by using clips from the 1962 movie of Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and more important, borrowing two familiar devices from Ken Burns, the oft-criticized but incomparable master of American documentary film. The first device is the slow camera pan across an old photograph or other archival image, zooming in and out to emphasize details. The second is the extreme wide shot of an unspoiled landscape, which combined with music can cover a lot of narration while also evoking the appropriate mood.

In *Created Equal*, the unspoiled landscape is also a waterscape: the vast tracery of narrow channels, wide creeks, and expansive estuaries that connect the low country of the southeastern states to the sea. This waterscape serves as the tonic, or keynote, of the whole film. In scenic wide shots accompanied by a soundtrack ranging from Louis Armstrong singing “Moon River” to the salty-sweet compositions of Charlie Barnett, and in footage taken from the vantage point of the boats (called “bateaus”) that ply its waters in search of crabs, fish, and oysters, this waterscape complements, and comments on, every twist and turn of Thomas’s story.

For example, when Thomas was 16 years old, he enrolled in a minor diocesan seminary called St. John Vianney, located in a small town southeast of Savannah. He was one of only two black students in the place, and needless to say, there were no enlightened administrators to swaddle them in layers of protection against hegemonic micro-aggressions. On the contrary, in the film Thomas recalls the dean of students telling him, “I would not be considered the equal of whites if I didn’t learn how to speak standard English.” The lesson hurt, Thomas admits. But his response was to heed it.

Right after hearing this, we watch a bateau slowing down as it approaches a fork in a channel, while Thomas reads the last stanza of Robert Frost’s famous poem, “The Road Not Taken”:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

And as the bateau turns into one of the forks and starts chugging along it, Thomas says,

Someplace in my life the roads had split off.... I had gone to all-white schools and it has made all the difference. What was that difference? That, I didn’t know. I was never going to be a part of that world; I was never going to be white. The problem is I could never go back completely to the world I came from.

### His Grandfather’s Son

**W**HY WOULD THOMAS WANT TO GO back? For an answer, we must turn to the most important figure in this story: his maternal grandfather. When Thomas was six, the family’s shack in Pinpoint burned down, and his mother, Leola, moved with her three children to Savannah, where she got a job as a maid for ten dollars a week. (Thomas’s father had left the family a few years before, and Leola refused to go on welfare.) But as Thomas recalls, there was a huge difference between the “rural poverty” of Pinpoint, which was “very livable,” and the “urban squalor” of Savannah, which was “hell.”

It soon became clear to Leola that she could not properly raise two boisterous boys in a rough part of the city while working full time. So, keeping her daughter, Emma Mae, with her, she sent Clarence and his younger brother, Myers, to live with her father, Myers Anderson, and his wife, Christina. Though hardly prosperous, the Andersons owned a modest home on a somewhat better street in the black section of Savannah, out of which they ran a small business delivering fuel oil.

Myers Anderson, whom the family called “Daddy,” was a wiry, ebony-skinned man with less than a year of formal schooling, who ruled his grandsons with an iron hand, making them labor “from sun to sun” and wielding his belt whenever they disobeyed. Having converted to Catholicism in 1949 because he liked the order and discipline, Anderson enrolled both boys in St. Benedict the Moor Grammar School, an all-black institution staffed by nuns, many of them Irish immigrants. “You are going to go to school every day, and if you are sick, you are still going,” Thomas remembers his grandfather saying. “And if you die, you will go. I will take your body for three days and make sure you’re not faking.” With a wry look, Thomas adds: “And he meant it.... It’s one thing if somebody says it, and you think they’re exaggerating. He wasn’t that kind of guy.”

What kind of guy was he? Here the water gets deep, because to understand the his-

tory of America, not just of one group but of America as a whole, it is crucial to understand the character of men and women like Myers Anderson and his wife (whom the family called “Aunt Tina”). Uneducated, poor, descended from slaves, they were among the country’s most marginalized and oppressed. Yet by force of will and faith in God, they refused to behave as victims or feed on anger and resentment. Not everyone in their milieu could manage such discipline, needless to say. But the few who could were respected, and their severity admired, not derided.

The late Albert Murray—novelist, music critic, and author of many wise meditations on American life—related this discipline to “the blues idiom” in music, which he regarded not just as an art form but as “equipment for living.” Combined in the blues are two bedrock American attitudes: “rugged individual endurance” and “sober acceptance of adversity as an inescapable condition of human existence.” Together, these lead not to giddy optimism or cynical pessimism, but to hope tempered with realism: “an affirmative disposition toward all obstacles.”

It should be obvious that any human being thus equipped will not wallow in self-indulgent grievance. But as Murray observed, this dimension of African-American life has rarely been appreciated by the larger cultural establishment: “Critics? Man, most critics feel that unless brownskin U.S. writers are pissing and moaning about injustice they have nothing to say. In any case it seems they find it much easier to praise such writers for being angry (which requires no talent, not to mention genius) than for being innovative or insightful.”

### A Precious Inheritance

**I**N THE MID-1960S, A COUPLE OF YEARS AFTER 16-year-old Thomas entered St. John Vianney, he decided to pursue a vocation as a priest. But as the decade wore on, he grew impatient with the Church’s apparent indifference to the black struggle, and incensed by the racial hostility of some of his fellow seminarians. In April 1968, after overhearing a hateful wisecrack about the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., he quit the seminary. That decision upset Thomas’s grandfather so much, he banished Thomas from the house that had once taken him in.

As described by Thomas in both the book and the film, this rejection by his grandfather was bitter, but not bitter enough to shake his newfound conviction that “racism and race explained everything.... I shoved aside Catholicism and now...it was all about race.” After a



period of aimlessness, he received an offer to join the first cohort of black undergraduates at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. And for a time, he joined the campus activists and took part in protest marches, public demonstrations, even a street riot in Harvard Square. These provided an outlet, he writes, for the “intoxicating, empowering, justifiable—and ultimately, self-destructive” rage of young blacks at the time.

Not coincidentally, this surrender to rage was accompanied by a new disdain for his grandfather and step-grandmother. In his autobiography, Thomas recalls filling out financial aid forms for Holy Cross and feeling

astonished to discover how little [Daddy] and Aunt Tina made from their fuel-oil business. How could they have worked so hard for so little, without a word of complaint? At one time I would have admired their stoicism, but now I took it as a sign of weakness, a willful refusal to face the realities of racism in America.

There is a striking parallel between this personal story and the changes that occurred as the black political struggle shifted from South to North. Describing those changes in his 1991 book, *The True and Only Heaven*, historian Christopher Lasch observes that the “notable combination of militancy and moral self-restraint” found in the Southern civil rights movement depended on the existence of “a vigorous black community in Southern towns and cities,” built by previous generations “under the most unpromising conditions.” Then, in painful detail, Lasch traces the reasons why similar efforts were far less successful in the North—the most important being “the demoralized, impoverished condition of the black community in cities like Chicago,” which could not provide the same “materials of self-respect.”

Similar to Murray’s “equipment for living,” these “materials of self-respect” are given pride of place in both the written and filmed versions of Justice Thomas’s life. But as he tells it, several years had to pass before he could fully appreciate this precious inheritance from the

people who raised him, especially his grandfather. But the value of that inheritance became clear during the ordeal that led up to the evening of October 11, 1991, when Supreme Court nominee Thomas appeared for the second time before the Senate Judiciary Committee to respond to the allegations of sexual harassment brought by his former employee, Anita Hill.

### You Can Give Out But You Can’t Give Up

AS EVERYONE KNOWS, HILL’S TESTIMONY differed greatly from Thomas’s. In his book, he reports that their first encounter was in 1981, when as a new appointee at the Department of Education, he hired Hill on the urging of a friend. In 1982, when Thomas was appointed chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Hill asked if she could follow him there. He agreed—on the urging of the same friend. In 1983 Hill left to join the law faculty at Oral Roberts University, and they lost contact.

In 1990 President George H.W. Bush nominated Thomas for a seat on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, and 19 months later, the president asked Thomas to consider replacing Justice Thurgood Marshall on the highest court in the land. The Senate hearings, which took place in September 1991, were grueling but not devastating. But then came the allegations from Hill, which Thomas characterizes as a complete surprise. Indeed, in his autobiography he writes that, while prepping for the September hearings, he had “penciled [Hill] in as a liberal whom I could call as a witness on my behalf should it become necessary.”

I was one of the millions who tuned into the October 11 hearings, and as a citizen, I was shocked by the grotesque details of the behavior attributed to Thomas. But as a woman familiar with the tone and tenor of American life during the sexually liberated 1970s and ’80s, I could not automatically dismiss Hill’s allegations. Indeed, in those long-ago days I found it somewhat inspiring to see a woman stand up and bear public witness to the degrading experience of being bullied sexually.

In *My Grandfather’s Son*, Thomas does not quote Hill’s testimony, saying only that his wife, Virginia, watched it but “I didn’t bother.” But here we see the particular advantage of documentary film. In *Created Equal*, the producers make generous use of the video from the C-SPAN coverage of the hearings. Watching Hill’s testimony afresh, I have to say it seemed strangely lacking in emotional intensity. She spoke mechanically, as though going through the motions and wishing it would all be over soon, making it hard to find even a spark of righteous anger.

The contrast could not be greater with Thomas’s response, which after some persuading by supporters, he agreed to deliver at 8 o’clock that same evening. In his book, he transcribes several pages of his own testimony and the questioning that followed. Compared with the book’s cursory treatment of Hill’s allegations, this lengthy treatment amounts to a glaring, if understandable, imbalance. But here again, the documentary has the advantage. By showing the C-SPAN video of both parties, it leaves the viewer free to decide whom to believe. Watching Thomas’s short, fiery “high-tech lynching” speech knock the wind out of every windbag in that Senate chamber, I believed him.

While working on this review, I emailed Peter Wood to ask him to explain his metaphor of “a bee in the mouth.” For me, it fits perfectly the image of Thomas at that crucial moment. Here was a man under duress, making a trembling, sweating, eye-watering effort to (in his grandfather’s words) give *out* before he gave *up*. But then Wood emailed back explaining that, for him, “a bee in the mouth” is a metaphor for the *opposite* type of behavior, an excessive “readiness to sting people with words.” There’s no arguing with another writer’s metaphor. But what if we were to alter the image, putting several bees in the mouth instead of one, and clenching the jaws? Perhaps then we could enlist this new metaphor in service of Wood’s older virtue of self-mastery. To have a “mouthful of bees” would mean gritting your teeth and holding back a swarm of furies while still managing to say what needs saying. If you can do that, who can doubt your character?

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