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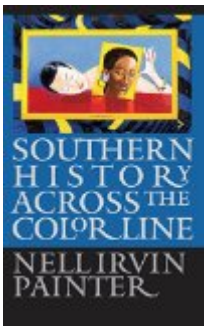
Nell Irvin Painter. *Southern History Across the Color Line.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 256 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2692-8.



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Race, Class, Gender and Violence: Toward a Psychology of Southern History

Nell Irvin Painter's book, Southern History Across the Color Line, is composed of six essays, mostly written between 1987 and 1996, in which the author attempts to weave together the themes of race, the physical body, violence, and sexuality in order to better probe the psychological dynamics of southern history. To some extent this book is Painter's farewell to the historical profession, as in her introduction she claims to be "ready for a new vocation" and informs readers that she intends to become an artist. If this book encapsulates Painter's legacy to the historical profession, she has left us some provocative questions, some interesting stories, and some useful methods.

"Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting" opens the collection. Painter uses the phrase "soul murder" to describe the damage done to black and white families through the violent legacy of slavery. The symptoms of "soul murder" include depression, anger, and low self-esteem, and its ultimate result is the loss of identity. Here Painter calls for students of slavery to examine the literature on child abuse and sexual abuse in the current scholarly world and apply the lessons thus gained to their own historical studies. This may strike some readers as a form of presentism, and it also calls to mind the now largely discredited 1959 work of Stanley Elkins in comparing slaves to Holocaust survivors. But Painter explicitly rejects the comparison to Elkins, as she reminds us (as many others have in the past thirty years) that slaves did find coping mechanisms in family and religious life, ultimately creating "alternative ideologies" that prevented them from having to accept what they were told by white masters. While acknowledging that both child abuse and sexual abuse tend to be passed down through generations, she leaves unasked the question of whether the violence of slavery is the source of violence in the post-bellum South, or in the black and white communities of today. The essay forges ahead on thinner ice when Painter claims (as she does again in a later essay) that most southern white women felt sufficient sympathy for slaves to develop "abolitionist leanings." She argues that these women shared a sense of powerlessness and victimization with their slaves,

but she offers only scattered evidence and conjecture to support this argument, perhaps expecting that the next generation of scholars will go looking for such support and refine the thesis accordingly, as they have with the writings of C. Vann Woodward and W. J. Cash.

"The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas: A Testament of Wealth, Loss, and Adultery" is in many ways the book's strongest essay. The essay consists of two parts, a narrative of the life of the diarist followed by Painter's attempt to read between the lines of the diary. Gertrude Thomas left behind a diary which covers more than forty years, from plantation daughter to planter's wife, through the turmoil of Civil War and Reconstruction, and finally to community involvement as a teacher and activist. The diary itself is a marvelous source, as it displays Thomas's consciousness of the changes she and her fellow southerners are facing. Thomas was indeed a remarkable woman and a keen observer despite her many prejudices, and unlike most Civil War-era diaries, hers continues through Reconstruction and beyond, revealing a glimpse-if only a glimpse-of a woman and a class gradually regaining its footing in an unfamiliar post-bellum world. According to Painter, however, the diary is just as significant for what it does not contain. Several times the diarist alludes obliquely, perhaps unintentionally, to her husband's drinking problem and his infidelity. Throughout, Painter regards the diary as not only a record of events but also a means for the diarist to justify herself to herself, to redefine and even reinvent herself as she creates a record for her descendants to use. Here Painter's keen and speculative intellect allows an insightful reading of a unique source, especially with regard to Thomas's attitude toward her husband's presumed ongoing liaison with a black woman. According to Painter's reading of the diary, Thomas felt powerless with regard to her husband's infidelity and his rumored drinking because of the importance of maintaining the social standards associated with her class and gender.

"Three Southern Women and Freud: A Non-Exceptionalist Approach to Race, Class, and Gender in the Slave South" analyzes Gertrude Thomas (again) alongside novelist Susan Pettigru King's novel Lily. Like Thomas, King's title character experiences her whiteness and her femininity as a form of helplessness, as only women of lower class and "darker" features (like Lily's cousin Angelica) can be regarded as sexual beings worthy of passion. The Madonna-Whore complex articulated by Freud takes form in King's novel half a century before Freud, with the importance of color shading (the pure white Lily versus the "sallow" Angelica) alerting the reader to differences in the moral makeup of the two characters. Significantly, there is no suggestion that Angelica is not of the Caucasian race, yet her grayish complexion still signifies something sexual when contrasted with Lily's "pure" whiteness and virginity. Painter then introduces Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) to place the perceived "powerlessness" of white slaveholding women in stark relief. Brent (Jacobs) displayed sympathy for the women whose husbands sought forbidden passion in black women's beds, but regarded herself and other black women as the chief victims of "a society built on extortion." Here the power of white men, not the restrictions associated with class and gender expectations, appears as the real evil. Painter concludes, tantalizingly, that the insights into sexual psychology displayed in these three women's lives anticipated and in some ways outshone Freud's examination of the famed "Dora" case of half a century later, a case in which the famed analyst attempted to explore the consequences of the relationship between employer-employee power relations and unwanted sexual advances.

"'Social Equality' and 'Rape' in the Fin-de-Siecle South" may well be, as Painter herself acknowledges in her introduction, an attempt to address too much material in too little space. None-

theless the essay provides much food for thought. Painter uses the insights of turn-of-the-century activists as diverse as Ray Stannard Baker, Ida B. Wells, and Rebecca Latimer Felton to connect the use of the politically-charged phrase "social equality"-used exclusively in the negative-to the personal and sexual meaning of "rape." To allow the first to exist would be to invite the second. Thus, in defending the South against those who advocated "social equality," southern politicians were inviting all southern men to defend their women (and their own masculinity) against "rape." This naturally led to the social pathology known as lynch law, which assumed rape as the goal of all black men and lynching as the obvious antidote or preventative. While others have developed the connection between sexuality and segregation more thoroughly in book form, Painter's treatment is fascinating and concisely done, and it supports her larger contention that segregation is as ingrained in the psyche of the individual as in the letter of the law.

"Hosea Hudson: the Life and Times of a Black Communist" is the oldest, the most personal and the least academically focused essay in this collection, and in many ways it seems misplaced, since gender and even race play a subordinate role to the importance of class identity. The author tells not only Hudson's story but, in a sense, her own as well, providing a readable and accessible treatment of Hudson's life as a Communist Party organizer in Alabama while frequently expressing both her affection for him and her frustration with his idiosyncrasies. On balance, Hudson emerges as a sympathetic character whose attachment to communism substitutes for the attachment others might feel toward their churches or lodges. Painter's suggestion that communism served as a surrogate for what others found through Christianity is tantalizing but, alas, underdeveloped in this essay. Noting that Hudson and many other recruits had found it difficult to do anything more sophisticated than memorization of communist doctrines, Painter goes on to credit the Party with Hudson's eventual literacy and, by the 1940s, his articulateness as a speaker. While Painter notes that Hudson's involvement with the Party cost him his marriage and family, she does not ford the waters of gender analysis here, refusing to question whether Hudson's communist activities were at all influenced by his notion of manhood, though Hudson himself gives her the material with which to do so. Nor does she examine critically Hudson's ex-wife's attitude toward his political involvement, even when it meant neglecting his obviously gender-specific duties as husband and father. Hudson never appears apologetic for his lifelong involvement, refusing to repudiate Stalin even when Khrushchev did so. "Stalin did something that nobody else hadn't done, to make it possible for us to be able to struggle," Hudson explained. More could have been done with the interplay between race and class in this essay, especially with the tantalizing tidbits Painter includes concerning the overwhelming whiteness of the non-southern Party. Hudson addressed the question briefly in the interviews, but Painter leaves the reader wanting a deeper analysis. When Painter questioned Hudson over accusations that the Party was just "using" black members to further goals set in Moscow, Hudson reacted with indignation; "how they going use us [sic] when we're part of this working class? We play our part as the workers." Yet Painter, in discussing the treatment Hudson's own autobiography received at the hands of International Publishers, demonstrates that this "CP-related press" did in fact alter and manipulate Hudson's story to make it conform more precisely to the Party's chosen image and agenda. Painter has assembled here the evidence needed for a more thorough and nuanced analysis of Party racial dynamics at the national and regional level, but she does not follow through, perhaps out of respect for and attachment to the subject of her interviews. So many other questions could have been asked of the stories Hudson told Painter, but it

seems that those questions must remain for others.

"Sexuality and Power in The Mind of the South" is derived from a talk Painter delivered at Wake Forest University on the fiftieth anniversary of W. J. Cash's influential book. In some ways this is the weakest essay of the six, as it takes Cash to task for objectifying women, African Americans, and especially African American women while removing that objectification from the context of the book itself. Cash was railing against the entire South, complaining about poor whites, rich whites, men and women of all races and classes. Cash was, as Painter points out, writing "a biography of a character named 'the South'," rather than a comprehensive study of the diverse minds that make up the region. But in complaining that Cash objectifies and demeans women and African American men, she is missing or ignoring the point that Cash was trying to make-that the entire South was a remarkably unchanging, puzzling, irrational construction built by planter-capitalist plutocrats. One may certainly quarrel with Cash's thesis, if it is a thesis, but Cash certainly did not sympathize with the planters, as Painter at times seems to suggest. One may justly criticize Cash for being racist and sexist and even classist, as one might well criticize him for his stream-of-consciousness style and his tendency toward convoluted arguments, but he is an equal-opportunity offender. Although Painter accurately points out in her concluding remarks that only the non-southerner emerges truly unscathed from The Mind of the South, a reader who expects this essay to provide an introduction to Cash's ideas might well conclude that Cash had written a conservative defense of southern traditions rather than a scathing critique of them.

The essays presented in Southern History Across the Color Line are sometimes oddly organized and might benefit from a firmer editorial hand. The tendency to regard each essay as a sacred relic from a particular time in Painter's career is understandable given her reputation as a scholar, but it makes for rather jarring shifts in tone as each essay seems written for a different audience and in a different voice. Some readers may also be put off by the author's willingness to insinuate herself into the material, as though the story of how she came to be interested in these historical actors is as relevant to her audience as the actors themselves. Her attempts to use psychological insights sometimes ring true, as with the struggle Gertrude Thomas underwent over her husband's indiscretions, and at other times fall flat, as when she asserts Cash's lust for black women without providing documentation or explaining her rationale for the conclusion. Where psychological methods might yield the greatest benefit, in analyzing Hosea Hudson's life and motives, the effort falls short. Still, on the whole, by using gender and class as bridges to cross the color line, Painter succeeds in raising important questions with this collection. Any historian should hope to leave such a legacy.

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