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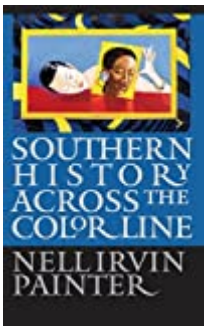

Nell Irvin Painter. *Southern History Across the Color Line.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 256 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-5360-3; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2692-8.

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Bodies and Souls

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This spring's meeting of the Organization of American Historians included a session on vivid writing that featured Nell Irvin Painter, Robert Caro, and Richard Norton Smith. Painter was a quiet presence, responding thoughtfully to questions about her writing and about history in general. Only once did a question seem to strike a spark. When a man asked her advice for his proposed biography of William Jennings Bryan, Painter perked up: "I envy you. I loooove Bryan."

In her introduction to *Southern History Across the Color Line*, a collection of essays written since 1988, Painter describes her response when a group of younger colleagues asked her how she "dealt with not having received adequate recognition for her work" (p. 10). She was astonished by the question, since she has published numerous books and holds an endowed chair at Princeton University. But she acknowledges, "I have experienced my work as struggle against the conventions of American education and scholarship.... For this black woman, at least (and I do not pretend to speak for anyone but myself) Western knowledge is not to be trusted" (p. 11). Painter positions her work as part of the attempt to take down the master's house with the master's tools (paraphrasing Audre Lorde). In short, she suggests that her writing has been against the grain of American racism and sexism, as indeed it has.

But Painter's response to the question about William Jennings Bryan is also indicative of the reasons why Painter is not as well known as some other members of the African-American intelligentsia (Cornell West and Henry Louis Gates come to mind). Who in the world loves William Jennings Bryan? Painter's interest in individuals, regardless of their popularity, race, class, or utility as object lessons in the American culture wars, places her work against the grain of present-day literary-marketing trends, if nothing else. So does her tendency, when given the choice of printing the facts or printing the legend, to go for the facts. For that reason, some readers were quite irritated by her work on Sojourner Truth.[1] It might be added that historians usually pick a field (political, social, labor, or women, for example) and a time period and build their careers on a narrow foundation of expertise in those areas. Yet Painter has writ-

ten about black farmers in the Midwest at the turn of the nineteenth century, black labor radicals in the South in the mid-twentieth century, and antebellum black abolitionists.[2] She has also produced one of the most-used books in Gilded Age-Progressive Era classes, *Standing at Armageddon*.[3]

Painter's career has been marked by a willingness to try new subjects and new analytical tools. In *Across the Color Line*, she uses psychology and semiology to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender in the South. Painter states that the unifying themes of these collected essays are material conditions, including class, the body, culture, and sexuality. Taken as a whole, however, these essays suggest that for Painter what transcends the analytical categories of history is a subject that historians find very difficult to write about: pain. It is pain, physical and emotional, that cuts across the color line.

In "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," Painter uses insights from modern psychology to reexamine the long-term human cost of slavery, both to slaves and slaveholders. In doing so, she resurrects the old Elkins thesis debate. In 1959, Stanley Elkins published *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, in which he compared southern plantations to Nazi concentration camps and argued that slavery had turned black men into lazy, childlike, and irresponsible "Sambos."[4] Drawing upon psychological studies of concentration camp survivors, Elkins contended that black Americans had internalized their oppressors' belief in black inferiority. Elkins's *Slavery* so irritated black historians and liberals (and, I might add, white southerners, although for different reasons) that it helped to provoke the great mid-century flowering of research into the history of slavery. Much of that research was designed to prove Elkins wrong, to prove that black people were not psychologically scarred by the slave experience.

But in doing so, Painter writes, "The Sambo problem was solved through the pretense that black people do not have psyches." Instead, they have communities, "as though black people shared a collective psyche whose only perception was racial, as if race obviated the need to discuss black people's subjective development" (p. 21). To admit that slavery had damaged black people's personalities, and that the effects were multigenerational, risked affirming Elkins's view of blacks as victims incapable of historical agency. While understanding the political imperative to refute the Elkins thesis, Painter argues that denying slaves "psychological personhood" skews not only the history of slavery but the history of the United States as a whole.

Drawing on psychiatric literature, Painter notes that people, especially children, who have been severely sexually, emotionally, and physically abused often suppress their own emotions and submerge their identities in those of their abusers, a process psychiatrists call "soul murder." She argues that soul murder was part and parcel of the antebellum political economy of the southern United States, which was founded on the violence of slavery. Blacks experienced soul murder as a result of the brutality of slavery, but Painter suggests that whites did not go undamaged: white wives had to accept patriarchy and put up with their husbands' adultery in the slave quarters, while white children grew up watching scenes of violent abuse and, as adults, recapitulated the patterns they had been taught. While slaves developed a counter-culture of family, community, and religion that offered alternative sources of dignity and self-worth, white women and children had no way out. Painter suggests that behind the scenes of upper-class family life, things were very Gothic indeed. Moreover, the violence within slave-owning families spilled over into southern society at large, producing the South's infamous culture of violence.

"The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas: A Testament of Wealth, Loss, and Adultery" takes us inside the white household that Painter describes in "Soul Murder." Published first as an introduction to *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, edited by Virginia Ingraham Burr, this essay provides a mini-biography of Gertrude Thomas.[5] Born to wealth in antebellum Georgia, Thomas kept a diary from girlhood through middle age. As Painter points out, the diary served many functions for Thomas. It was a record of events, a spiritual accounting book, and (at times) a confidant for feelings that Thomas could not show.

Painter establishes that the dominant trope of the diary is loss–of money and position, due to the Civil War, but also of innocence. Thomas's beloved father dies and leaves her property that apparently included some of his children by a slave woman. Her husband proves to be improvident, alcoholic, and unfaithful, fathering a child by a black woman. Painter's empathy for Thomas's pain shines through the text but does not keep her from the tough conclusion that women like Thomas were willing to trade their "gender interests" for their class interests. Women like Thomas put up with cheating husbands as part of the cost of maintaining their positions as mis-

tresses of slaves.

"Three Southern Women and Freud: A Non-Exceptionalist Approach to Race, Class and Gender in the Slave South" takes us further into the southern family romance. In this essay, Painter points out that the antebellum South was not the only hierarchical society in which male privilege made servants and slaves the sexual rivals and equals of their supposed superiors, the mistresses and daughters of the household. Sigmund Freud's world was like that too. Applying Freudian insights to southern family dynamics, Painter considers three texts: Gertrude Thomas's diary, Susan Petigru King's 1855 novel *Lily*, and Harriet Jacobs's famous *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, first published in 1861.[6]

In these three texts, Painter finds evidence of secrets kept, of sexual rivalry between black and white women, and of the degradation slavery brought to all women. Painter links this material to Freud's 1912 essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," in which the Viennese doctor described upper-class men's compartmentalization of their personal lives. Such men reserved love for their wives but directed their sexual desire toward the debased women of the lower classes. Painter concludes by encouraging historians to reexamine southern history through family history and to acknowledge that white women often saw themselves as the "losers in competition with women who though black and poor and powerless seemed somehow more attractive" (pp. 110-111). Painter notes that this rivalry "helps explain the thorniness of women's contacts across the color line across the entire twentieth century" (p. 111).

In " 'Social Equality' and 'Rape' in the Fin-de-Siecle South," Painter connects class and sexuality with politics. Painter argues that for elite whites, race and class were almost synonymous. She notes that in white supremacist rhetoric "white" means upper class, and "black" means laboring class. Any divergence from this rule required modifiers: "poor" white, or "middle-class" black. Therefore the entire Jim Crow agenda, including segregation and disfranchisement, can be seen as an attempt by southern elites to maintain control over the black working class. Non-elite whites supported this agenda, Painter argues, because they obtained at least marginal economic benefits from it. However, she says, "Sex was the whip that white supremacists used to reinforce white solidarity, probably the only whip that would cut deeply enough to keep poor whites in line" (p. 117). Regardless of class, white men "owned" white women and could be rallied to protect white womanhood. Painter compares white supremacist rhetoric to pornography, noting that the "pornographic mind" creates scenarios of dehumanization and degradation. However, white supremacists evoked pathologies of sex and fear because it served their political and social ends: "the creation and maintenance of a powerless working class" (p. 132).

"Hosea Hudson: The Life and Times of a Black Communist" was the fruit of Painter's collaboration with Hudson on *Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South*. In the essay, Painter combines a biography of Hudson with a memoir of their work together on his book. Hosea Hudson was a member of the working class that white elites tried so hard to keep subjugated. In the case of Hudson as an individual, they failed spectacularly. However, Painter points out, Hudson's life reveals much about the twentieth-century South and about leftist politics up through the end of the 1980s. Hudson was raised in rural poverty, in a culture of violence. The Communist Party gave him a place in which he could learn and develop his talents for leadership. He gave the Party almost unquestioning loyalty. Painter writes that Hudson was never able to get very upset about Joseph Stalin's reign of violence in the Soviet Union. According to Hudson, "Stalin had done more than anybody else for the rights of the Negro in the South" (p. 161).

The final essay in *Southern History Across the Color Line*, "Sexuality and Power in *The Mind of the South*" views Wilbur J. Cash's famous book in the light of Freud and feminism.[7] Painter makes it clear that the "mind" in the title was male, white, and neurotic; obsessed with sex, race, and status; and both envious and afraid of the poor folks, black and white, who were just around the corner making noise and having fun. Reading this essay after the others led me to think that the "mind" Cash was writing about had been produced by the pathological southern households described in Painter's earlier essays. Cash's southerner is hurting and does not know it, much less know why.

In her essay on Hosea Hudson, Painter comments that she liked him in part because he was "too strong, too opinionated, too convinced of his own rightness to be lovable in the way that so many Americans want to love black people" (p. 176). Painter's essays strike me as being like that too. Like Hudson, they are gnarly, a bit cranky, and difficult, as Painter tries to bring to bear concepts and analytical tools not customarily used together. Painter's writing style is never difficult and is occasionally beau-

tiful. But she writes as an intellectual, not a popularizer, and she lets no one off easy. Perseverance in reading these essays pays off. "Soul Murder" is a fine, audacious piece of writing that walks the tightrope above the Elkins thesis without ever falling in. It should be read by all who want to bring psychological insights into history, as an example of how to do it with intellectual honesty. On the other hand, as Painter herself notes, " 'Social Equality' and 'Rape' " tries to do too much. Here, as in "Soul Murder," Painter touches on well-known themes of southern history but makes them new by situating them in a discourse of power and class. The essay reads like a set of notes for a book, however, with Painter's themes more sketched out than integrated. I wish she would write the book.

Ironically, the least difficult thing is Painter's decision to write "across the color line." As she says, despite the honorable example of John Hope Franklin, for most historians "the old habit of writing only or mainly about white people or only or mainly about black people dies hard" (p. 2). While whites write about blacks, blacks rarely write about whites. By writing across the color line, Painter says, she does not mean to ignore race, but to keep in mind that a human being is not just "a unit of race" (p. 4). She urges historians to use analytical categories like race, class, and gender, while retaining an awareness that life is about more than these categories. Her biographical sketches of Gertrude Thomas and Hosea Hudson illustrate that point.

Authors often complain that reviewers chide them for not having written the book that the reviewer wanted to read. So here I go. I wish that Painter had written more about class. Not that she does not try: this book is better on the class implications of gender and race than most I have read. Not that it is easy: as Painter herself notes, Americans would rather talk about race than class. This is obviously true, but I would like to hear what Painter sees as the reason for that. These thoughts were provoked by Painter's analysis of Cash's *Mind of the South*. Painter says that when she first read the book, as an undergraduate, she thought it was racist. Then as a graduate student, she thought it was sexist. Well, when I first read it, as a graduate student, I thought I had never met anyone like Cash's southerner in my life. In my own South, that of working-class hillbillies, people just did not take on like that. I thought the book was really strange until my circle of acquaintances expanded to include more upper-class southerners, at which point I had to acknowledge that Cash might have been on to something, not about the South as a whole, but about a particular class-based southern experience.

Having enjoyed these essays and (more importantly) having been provoked to thought by them, I wish that Painter had written more across the class line. It would be a joy to see her analytical abilities applied to the interactions between working-class and elite whites, as well as to blacks and elite whites. In her introduction, she says that she is ready for a new vocation and threatens to jump the historical ship for art school. I hope not. The profession would miss her.

Notes

[1]. Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton and Sons, 1996).

[2]. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[3]. Nell Irvin Painter, _Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919 (New York: W. W. Norton and Sons, 1987).

[4]. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[5]. Virginia Ingraham Burr, ed., *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, with an introduction by Nell Irvin Painter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[6]. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself*, edited with an introduction by Nell Irvin Painter (New York: Penguin, 2000); Susan Petigru King, *Gerald Gray's Wife; and Lily: A Novel*, with an introduction by Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[7]. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941).

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