

Review: Steel Magnolias

Reviewed Work(s): Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the Civil War by Drew Gilpin Faust: The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890 by LeeAnn Whites

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Steel magnolias

by Stephanie McCurry

Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the Civil War, by Drew Gilpin Faust. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 326 pp., \$29.95 hardcover.

The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890, by LeeAnn Whites. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 277 pp., \$35.00 hardcover.

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE have never known the chastening experience of being on the losing side of a war," C. Vann Woodward noted in 1958. But Southerners had; and, he argued in his now-classic essay, "The Search for Southern Identity," that sowed the seed of Southern distinctiveness and created a powerful counterpoint to the myth of American innocence and success. The war in question was, of course, the Civil War.

More than forty years later, two other historians—Drew Faust and LeeAnn Whites—conduct their own search for Southern identity. Like Woodward, they fix on the meaning of the Civil War and seek to extract national meanings from that profoundly regional experience of defeat. For these two feminist historians it is the distinctive identity of white Southern women that is at issue. If Susan B. Anthony thought "Failure is impossible," Faust points out in *Mothers of Invention*, elite Southern women knew otherwise, and their ambivalence about women's suffrage registered that weight of history.

Both *Mothers of Invention* and *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender* grapple with the figure of the Steel Magnolia—that "ambiguous tradition of seemingly contradictory strength and frailty in white southern women," as Faust puts it—and each finds her origins in the experience of Civil War and slave emancipation. Both authors take as their subject the history of elite white Southern women during the Civil War, Faust in a treatment that covers the entire region, Whites in a local study of Augusta, Georgia. Both also attempt to assess the meaning of elite women's Civil War experience for the post-war and post-slavery world of race and gender relations in the American South. Both move Southern women to the center of American women's history and the history of feminism and, more pointedly, move women to the center of the history of the South and the American Civil War. Viewed from this perspective, the case for Southern distinctiveness endures, but not quite as Woodward had it for so long.

"I have tried to write this book as if my mother and grandmothers were going to read it," Faust tells us, fearing that "after two decades as an academic historian I no longer can communicate in a manner that will engage a general reader." She need not fear. This beautifully written and deeply researched book could hardly fail to engage the attention of any reader. Faust uses the stories of individual women to build a powerful and controversial argument about slaveholding women's experience in the Civil War and their role in Confederate defeat.

Drawing on prodigious research in private papers (she visited 34 archives), Faust summons the voices of the South's most privileged women on a range of issues from secession itself to slavery, marriage, Sherman's march, Confederate politics and Confederate defeat. She skillfully brings out the human quality, texture and cost of the war, nowhere better than in the chapter on marriage. "Oh Johnny," Julia Davidson wrote to her husband in the Confederate army, "we little knew how dear we were to each other until we were called on to make this great sacrifice."

Daily confronted with the possibility of death, slaveholding men and women struggled to find a language of emotional intimacy adequate to the moment. George Peddy tried, writing his wife Kate: "I wish I could tell or write to you how well I love you. When I undertake to do so I am at a loss for words and language strong enough to express it." David McRaven tried too: "Amanda," he wrote, "I am getting romantic you will laugh at an old fellow 48 years writing Love like a boy." Who would not be moved?

But Faust deftly pulls us back from a romanticization of Confederate marriage with a few sharp reminders of its central characteristic in a slave society: "If you would only *tell me* to do something, I would like it so much," Emma Crutcher wrote her husband; "I should feel like I was your wife, and that you claimed your property." So constituted emotionally, most slaveholding women came to lament rather than celebrate "warborn independence and autonomy."

THE ARGUMENT FAUST OFFERS boldly scales the walls that customarily divide social, political and military history. The difficulties slaveholding women faced in the Civil War, she claims, led them willy-nilly to a critical perspective on slavery, patriarchy, ladyhood and ultimately the Confederate cause itself. "Increasingly," she writes, "suffering produced not resignation but anger—directed against both God and State.... For southern women necessity, not choice, would prove to be the source of change—what they would have called the 'mother of invention'." Disruptions of the patterns and prospects of marriage, the necessity of paid public work for some, and the collapse of men's conventional role as "protectors" all worked to undo "the logic of female subordination" and led women, if ambivalently, toward a new conception of womanhood.

But it was "women's troubling experiences as slave managers" in the absence of their men that proved decisive, Faust insists, in "undermin[ing] women's active support for both slavery and the Confederacy." "Master's eye and voice are much more potent than mistress," Catherine Edmonston noted in frustration. Because "violence was gendered as male within the ideology of the Old South," Faust points out, it was "the physical dimension of slave control"—beatings, whippings, and other physical violence now to be ordered or executed by women—that led a great many to disavow the institution of slavery.

Lizzie Neblett, Texas farm wife and mistress of eleven slaves, epitomized the "profound personal crisis of identity generated by [a] new and unaccustomed role." Used to dealing "occasional strikes [of the whip] against female [house] slaves," she felt ambivalent about the "brute force" required to keep male slaves in line, as the master's absence and the opportunities of war created new openings for resistance and flight. "I am sick and tired of trying to do a man's business when I am nothing but a poor contemptible piece of multiplying human flesh tied to the house by a crying young one, looked upon as belonging to a



Alicia Suskin Ostriker.

The "terrible stories" Clifton tells in this collection are all powerful. But I found the most affecting sequence in the book to be "From the Cadaver," the poems about cancer and mastectomy. "What is the splendor of one breast/ on one woman?" she asks. In "lumpectomy eve" she describes the sense of loss: "all night it is the one breast /comforting the other." And in "1994" she describes the fear of waking "into the winter/ of a cold and mortal body/ thin icicles hanging off/ the one mad nipple weeping."

There is no self-pity here, however. What is here is a willingness to embrace our collective experience—"you must know all about this," she says, "from your own shivering life." Finally, there is hope. In the wonderfully spirited "hag riding," we wake with the speaker "to the heat of morning/ galloping down the highway of my life" when

something hopeful rises in me
rises and runs me out into the road
and I lob my fierce thigh high
over the rump of the day and honey
i ride i ride (p.26)

Clifton's stripped-down lines, characteristically direct and unadorned language, lack of punctuation and gem-like metaphors all work to create a poetry so concentrated it bypasses the cerebral, traveling straight to the heart. Gritty and determined, these are poems that look mortality in the eye.

IN "THE CLASS," in Alicia Suskin Ostriker's eighth collection, *The Crack in Everything*, the speaker/teacher says her job is to give her students "permission/ to gather pain into language," to make an art that is not "divisible from dirt,/ from rotten life," because, she believes, "Against evidence.../ Poetry heals or redeems suffering," even if it is "not the poet who is healed,/ But someone else, years later." Ostriker examines subjects as diverse as "weightless/ unstoppable neutrinos/ leaving their silvery trace/ in vacuum chambers," a Times Square bag lady in her "cape of rusty razor blades," three million dead "stacked...like sticks" in winter, or the "nectar/ in the bottom of a cup/ This blissfulness in which I strip and dive." This world is seen against the undercurrent of mortality that pulses beneath even the most optimistic poems.

Ostriker writes from a level of awareness that is both heartbreaking and healing, precisely because it encompasses so much loss. She searches for what, in the title of one poem, she calls "The Vocabulary of Joy," noting how very difficult indeed it is to "define...happiness,/ Though surely you know what I mean/ In the late twentieth century// when I say this."

The book moves from examinations of contemporary events to meditations on art and artists, to musings about the meaning of existence, to the closing, more immediately personal poems on age, illness and healing. Part of Ostriker's search is the search for self in mid-life. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" the speaker asks in "Neoplatonic Riff." "Didn't I use to be

you?" "Looking like a grownup, but still/ Crayoning in the outlines, a good child./ A good committee member," she finds herself in her fifties, still trying to figure out who she is.

One of Ostriker's greatest strengths as poet has always been the lack of separation between self and world in her work. Immediate, passionate and direct, even the more public poems in this collection possess an intimacy that startles the reader. Capable of personifying subjects as diverse as a California surfer, a migrant, even a "globule" of transparent life, Ostriker also testifies to the horrors of our time. In poems like "The Russian Army Goes Into Baku" and "The Eighth and the Thirteenth" she looks at cruelty and violence with a fierce and unblinking eye.

In the splendid extended sequence "The Book of Life," she reflects on the strength of spirituality and the friendships of female creators. "To whom shall we say/ *Inscribe me in the book of life*," she asks—

To whom if not each other
To whom if not our damaged children
To whom if not our piteous ancestors
To whom if not the lovely ugly forms
We have created,
The forms we wish to coax
From the clay of nonexistence—
However persistent the voice
That rasps hopeless, that claims
Your fault, your fault—
As if outside the synagogue we stood
On holier ground in a perennial garden
Jews like ourselves have just begun to
plant. (p.45)

Here, in one seamless stanza, the speaker embraces self, family, friends, creative work and spirituality, making what must die away into life.

Like Clifton, Ostriker describes the experience of mastectomy, writing a path though the "riddle" of illness with clarity and grace. "You think it will never happen to you," she begins, whirling us into diagnosis, surgery and recovery with the peculiar intimacy of the second person. There is shock here. The post-op scar is a "skinny stripe/ That won't come off with soap/ A scarlet letter lacking a meaning.../ It's nothing." There is grief: "Was I succulent? Was I juicy?/ you sliced me like a green honeydew." There is rage. The poet is careful never to say "the thing that is forbidden to say," never invites her colleagues "to view it pickled in a Mason jar." There is healing: "Like one of those trees with a major limb lopped/ I'm a shade more sublime today than yesterday." And finally, in the delightfully understated "Epilogue: Nevertheless," there is recovery. "It actually takes me a while," she says, "To realize what they have in mind" when friends ask how she is feeling. Book-bag on her back, she is out the door, to whatever comes next. These strong, tough-minded, lyrical poems take us there too.

Though they begin from similar emotional points of reference, each of these three poets offers us a different perspective on loss, damage or fear and its transformation through the ritual of poem-making. Lloyd, whose work I find most direct, accessible and affecting, speaks in a voice that is both intimate and individual. Reading her is like sitting with a friend at a kitchen table, exchanging confidences over tea. Clifton, by contrast, is a myth-maker: her condensed, gem-like poems cast their spell from some source near the center of existence. Ostriker, though often tender, is overall witty and urbane, a poet of intellect whose voice is filtered through an acute social consciousness. But all speak with authenticity and authority, claiming the events of their lives and helping us to approach our own terrible stories in the process.

race of inferior beings," she wrote her soldier husband in August 1863. For Neblett, like many of the region's slaveholding women, the war-born tryout at playing master proved a burden beyond bearing.

For a few, Faust claims, the experience engendered identification "not with the white elite [in] whose interest the war was being fought, but with the South's oppressed and disadvantaged." More typically, the trials of slave management in a time of war led to a critique of the institution of slavery, but not an identification with slaves themselves: "The growing emotional and physical cost of the system to slaveholding women made its own forceful appeal, and many slave mistresses began to persuade themselves that the institution had become a greater inconvenience than benefit."

The burden of elite women's doubt and suffering registered at the level of the individual and the state. "The Confederacy!" wrote Emily Harris in November 1864, "I almost hate the word." By 1864, Faust finds, most elite Southern women had moved from a "romantic militarism" to "a practical pacifism born of exhaustion and despair." They "fled" as well "from the responsibility of empowerment into the reassuring safety of tradition's protective shelter." In this way they made "their particular contribution to Confederate military failure" and launched the ambiguous Southern style of womanhood, the Steel Magnolia.

Here Faust offers her own controversial answer to the perennial question "Why did the South lose the Civil War?" But if she is bold in her claims, she is not entirely convincing. As her own evidence attests, most plantation mistresses viewed their slaves as the "Enemies in the Household," not as fellow victims. After all, Lizzie Neblett,

who "wished repeatedly to die, to be a man, or to give up the slaves altogether," also wished, tellingly, to keep "one good negro to wait upon me." Even at the bitter end, most slaveholding women were appalled at the specter of Yankee victory and slave emancipation: "I dread our house servants going and having to do their work," one whined. In spite of Faust's fascinating treatment, Southern ladies still look like unlikely candidates to carry the burden, and credit, of Confederate military defeat.

The story looks quite different from the perspective of other groups of subordinated and disaffected Southerners who do not figure in Faust's book: poor white and yeoman women, and above all slaves, those "Enemies in the Household" whose opinions of their mistresses, amply recorded in Civil War documents, would do much to illuminate the wartime struggle to reconfigure relations of power on the plantations, and who did more than any other group of Southerners, as many historians have now argued, to erode Confederate prospects of success. The South's slaveholding women did tire of the war and its unaccustomed deprivations, but few if any tired of the privileges of their class and gender.

There was much, as Faust concedes, that was "reactionary" about the "new" Southern womanhood. Exactly. It is in elite women's focus on self over state that Faust finds the emergence of a peculiarly Southern style of womanhood and a conservative sectional force within the post-war national women's movement. "Am I willing to give my husband to gain Atlanta for the Confederacy?" Gertrude Thomas asked. "No, No, No, a thousand times No!" Male protection, not female independence, was the heartfelt desire of elite Southern

women at war's end, and they asserted themselves, even against the state, to retrieve it.

That ambivalence about independence, conservatism on gender politics, or a persistent racist stream in women's suffrage are peculiarly Southern, I think we have reason to doubt from the sobering perspective of our own time; but that the case for Southern distinctiveness must be put on a new gendered footing is obvious.

LEANN WHITES AGREES, although her approach is slightly different. Her much slimmer volume, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*, shares many of Faust's concerns and comes to similar conclusions, most notably that elite women embraced male "protection" and were ambivalent about independence. Like Faust, she identifies the source of those attitudes in the experience of the Civil War and post-slavery race relations. But unlike Faust, she does not question slaveholding women's loyalty to the Confederate cause or implicate them in military defeat. Instead, she focuses on "the adherence of white women to the 'cause' of their men" during the war and on the Confederate memorialization movement, in which Augusta women played a leading part. It is not the Civil War so much as its troubling legacy in the 1890s that drives her analysis.

Whites' book began as a dissertation on New South millworkers and moved back chronologically, directed by a series of intelligent questions about the origins of New South womanhood and gender relations in the revolutionary disruptions of Civil War and emancipation. The Civil War, says Whites, unleashed a crisis in gender relations in the American South not fully resolved until the end of the century. She focuses on one class, elite white women, in one place, Augusta, Georgia. But it is not the local focus that holds this book together, it is the feminist inquiry: "Until we recognize that whites have race and that men have gender and that both have a social history," Whites observes, "then gender studies will remain incomplete" and Southern history captive to its "view from nowhere." This is an ambitious agenda and it would take a lot to execute it. It is hardly surprising, then, that the book is more an outline than a fully fleshed out history.

The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender is an extended reflection on the politics of protection: the efforts of planter class women to hold their men to the patriarchal promise of protection during and after the war. Faced with the collapse of male support during the war and with the revolutionary rearrangement of class and race relations in the post-emancipation world, elite women rejected "a politics grounded in independence for women," a generalized critique of male dominance and a cross-class-sisterhood. Instead they developed a fiercely conservative dedication to the "domestic reconstruction" of their own men as providers and protectors. "In these troublous times how soothing the idea of a place of refuge," Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas noted in late 1864. "To a woman's nature how inexpressibly delightful the ideas of safety and protection."

Whites emphasizes how the wartime destitution of "common women"—which is to say, poor whites—"highlighted for elite women the real meaning of independence from male support," and drove home the desirability of continued dependence on men. But nothing looms larger in her account than the emancipation of the slaves, which precipitated a "radical re-

structuring of the scope and meaning of...manhood"—and womanhood—for Augusta's white elite.

Men already "emasculat[ed] by military defeat" experienced the loss of control over slave dependents as a crushing blow to masculinity; unleashed from its moorings in the secure distinctions of slave society, elite women's gender identity was no less undone. Emancipation required not just the political reconstruction of the region but the "domestic reconstruction of southern white men."

This was the cultural work of the Lost Cause, Whites argues convincingly, and it was largely women's creation. Through voluntary activity in Confederate memorialization associations, white women readily embraced the opportunity to redefine manhood. Accepting a newly domesticated role as "provider," devastated white men turned away from politics and the struggles over public power that had defined manhood in the antebellum period, and inward to the command of those female dependents left to them.

Whites is persuasive on many fronts—in insisting, for example, that we "shift our angle of vision from the white male class perspective from which Woodward (along with his subjects) perceived the situation [in the New South] and consider instead the relations of race and gender out of which the 'divided mind' of these men was built." But her approach succeeds more by prescription than example; she fails to do more than invoke the "relations of race" and the context in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow South within which the Lost Cause movement took shape.

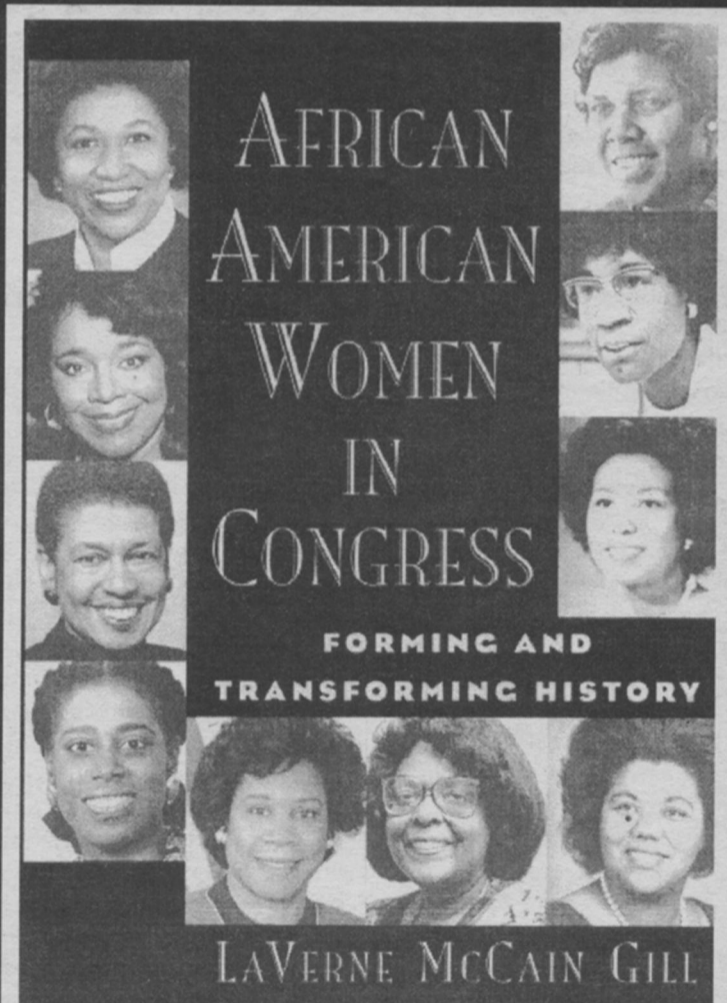
Curiously, Whites insists that in the post-emancipation South white men surrendered altogether the arena of politics and the fundamental struggles over labor relations, federal relations and citizenship it involved: "Only by shifting their line of vision from the public arena could southern men hope to reclaim their identity [as men]" she writes, in an argument dramatically at odds with every other piece of scholarship on the Reconstruction South. Freedmen and freedwomen who battled ex-masters over the terms of freedom, not infrequently at risk to their lives, certainly would not agree—and neither would their historians. To function as "provider," to take only one example, embroiled planters in daily struggles with newly emancipated black men and women over the terms of agricultural labor. The record is bloody; there is no evidence that white men conceded the fight.

Whites fails to engage with the primary or secondary sources on emancipation and the revolutionary struggles it involved—the focus of all other Reconstruction historiography. Though she starts by criticizing the separatist tendency in women's history, she herself separates far too radically this history of gender from the history of race, labor and politics in the post-emancipation South.

These two ambitious books mark a critical coming-of-age for feminist scholarship in Southern history. In both, however, the importance of race and African American women's history is more theoretically than actually present. Elite women's stories of struggle and suffering, love and loss have had the stage too much to themselves. In the absence of slaves' and freedwomen's perspectives, it is difficult to keep in sight the larger pro-slavery and Jim Crow cause for which Confederate and New South women struggled. Putting Faust's and Whites' women into a more crowded field must be the next step in Civil War and Southern women's history.

"It is time for us to talk about race. It is time for us to talk about racism. It is time for us to use our power."

—Congresswoman Maxine Waters



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