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Joan E. Cashin, ed. *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. x + 309 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5306-7.

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The Mask of Resignation

"'And yet, they say our voices are the softest, sweetest, in the world?'

"'No wonder. The base submission of our tone must be music in our masters' ears.'"

Mary Chesnut's Civil War, p. 735

Joan Cashin's collection of the writings of white Southern women is an excellent addition to the growing body of published primary sources and monograph studies on the culture of the antebellum South. The collection is divided into six thematic sections dealing with various aspects of white women's lives and the issues that concerned them (family, friendship, work, race, public life, and secession). The items in every section are arranged chronologically and each of the 128 items is annotated and preceded by a brief biographical note. This arrangement enables the reader to discern the emerging patterns of women's culture and the evolution of women's views on a key of issues, such as race and seccesion. The selections are preceded by an introductory essay which surveys the field of white Southern women's history since the 1970s to the present. While not followed by an annotated bibliography, the notes to the essay will provide students and readers with a basic reading list on the subject.

Cashin is to be applauded for her choice of texts. Ranging from the humorous to the poignant, from the dreary to the uplifting, the collection traces the contours of white women's culture. Although most of the writers belonged to property-holding families, Cashin makes a concerted effort to move away from the traditional focus on women of the planter class. She includes several selections from the papers of yeomen and non-elite women (both urban and rural). Cashin alternates the writings of older, married or widowed women with those of younger single women, those of Protestant women with those of Jewish women. In an attempt to access the lives of illiterate women and those of women who did not leave diaries and letters, she includes wills, court proceedings, recipes, and literary pieces. Cashin's choices (of documents and women) constantly and subtly reiterate the fact that white women in the South were not a monolithic group and their experiences were diverse.

In the introductory essay, Cashin focuses on the way historians have dealt with the issue of white Southern female culture. She proposes that historians of white Southern women give up using Northern women's culture as a silent referent and cease assuming "that the only culture worthy of a name had to result in political activity" (p. 7). Cashin correctly points out that under these criteria women's culture in the North would be found wanting as well, since the majority of white Northern women did not join reform societies of any kind, and similar to Southern culture it too was divided by class and race. Instead, Cashin suggests that historians adopt an anthropological definition of culture: a set of learned behaviors, at times internally inconsistent and permeable to other practices, shared by members of a society. Cashin argues that this definition would enable historians to delve into the uncharted depths of white Southern women's culture and examine several issues which have remained relatively neglected, such as the arrangement of female space, women's oral culture, fashion, and the histories of women belonging to the South's religious and ethnic minorities.

This is a strong collection of texts which will be an asset in any classroom (once the paperback edition comes out). It is because of the strengths of this collection (which I hope will garner the book its well-earned success) that I have some misgivings about Cashin's decision to characterize white Southern women's culture as "a culture of resignation." The term does a disservice to this collection of texts. At times it is a annoying misnomer, at others it undermines the main thrust of Cashin's argument that an important paradigm of Southern women's history needs to be reworked. It is this term which even-

tually leads Cashin to fall back to the position she previously criticized and to conclude that white Southern women's culture was eventually "a culture of resignation, not a culture of reform," (p. 22) whose "fundamental premises were that women should accept inequity, not resist it, and that they should refrain from any involvement in partisan, electoral politics" (p. 2). This conclusion is at odds with the evidence provided by some of the texts in the collection and with the findings of other historians, such as Victoria Bynum (*Unruly Women*) and Laura Edwards ("Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction"), whose work documents the ways in which poor white women resisted, criticized, and at times took violent action against the prevalent social order.

The choice of the term "a culture of resignation" is particularly baffling in view of Cashin's call to look beyond the overt, public, and political acts to the "hidden transcript" that lay at the base of white women's oral culture and which is present in many of the texts in the collection. Since Cashin introduces James Scott's concept of the "hidden transcript" I am puzzled by her hesitance to incorporate its implications. Scott's term, the "hidden transcript", cannot be read as resignation. Scott argues that at the side of the subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant (the "public transcript"), exists a discourse concealed from the eyes of the dominant (the "hidden transcript"). This "hidden transcript" includes all those "speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, p. 4-5). This suggests that while subordinates may adopt a mask of resignation, they are far from resigned to their lot. In fact they may be agitating against it, but having grasped the price of open, public insubordination they have learnt to conceal their criticism and discontent from the eyes of the dominant group. The desire to conceal their activities leads subordinate groups to be "complicitous in contributing to a sanitized official transcript" (Scott, p. 87).

Both the pressure to conceal and the desire to express criticism and discontent is evident in many of the texts. Most of the women expressed only in private (in letters and in conversations) their discontent and painful awareness of the constraints on their lives and the behavior of their male relatives. They railed, ridiculed, joked, and passed caustic remarks about their lot in life, while at other times they schooled themselves to endure and submit. A few women expressed their discontent publicly. They openly criticized the burdens of pregnancy and childbirth, testified in court against a friend's abusive husband in view of the system's notorious dismissal of such charges, or supported a church's Sunday school classes for blacks in the face of threatened violence. These were both private actions of personal courage (or stubbornness) and public actions with political resonance. They should not be viewed as isolated outbursts but as highlighted areas in a pattern of resistance, albeit one which existed in a society where the sanctions for open resistance were severe.

This criticism should not diminish the importance and usefulness of this collection. I hope Cashin's essay will spark off further debate among students and historians of the early republic about how we think about power and its workings (hegemony, false consciousness, the rituals of power and defiance) and the ways our work may be enriched by the theoretical concepts and framework offered by work of anthropologists and ethnologists and the members of the Subaltern Studies group.

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