H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marli F. Weiner. *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xii + 308 pp. $23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06623-8; $45.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02322-4.

Reviewed by Virginia J. Laas (Missouri Southern State College)
Published on H-CivWar (July, 1998)

Positing gender and race as the two most important factors affecting southern experience, Marli Weiner explores the lives of black and white women, concentrating her study on the large plantations of South Carolina. Drawing on a wealth of primary materials, both published and unpublished, she develops a complex analysis of plantation women and the changing relationship between black and white women.

In the first two chapters, Weiner offers a rich description of the working lives of black and white women. It is a familiar story well told, providing abundant detail that reinforces the portrait of women's work found in such studies as Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). The signal contribution made by Weiner in this section is her emphasis upon the opportunities for black and white women to work together as domestic producers. While conceding that the "vast majority of [black] women spent most of their working lives in the fields," Weiner contends that most of them also spent some time working in domestic production, preparing food and clothing for plantation residents (p. 12). Thus, the white mistress had direct and regular contact with not only her house slaves but also with field hands who spent a portion of their time in domestic production, and most slave women had some first-hand experience in working with the mistress. Therein lay the possibility of gender identification across the racial boundary.

Weiner begins Part Two with an explanation of the Cult of Domesticity, southern-style. Defined as virtuous, delicate, submissive, and nurturing, women were meant to be subordinate to their husbands. Physically and mentally inferior to men but morally superior, they were shielded from the crassness of public life by confinement within the domestic sphere where they could create a haven in a heartless world. This ideology required southerners to perform philosophic gymnastics in order to preserve racial superiority. Physical inferiority, by itself, could not require subordination; if it did, white women would be inferior to black men and most black women, an unthinkable situation. Southerners strained to maintain a hierarchy in which white women, subordinate to white men, were nevertheless superior to all blacks. White women had to do some ideological contortions of their own. Innately nurturing, they could show benevolence toward their slaves, yet as mistresses, they were empowered to punish.

Black women, too, were influenced by the cult of domesticity, but they used it for their own purposes. As Weiner states, "While blacks may have adopted some white conventions for women's behavior, they did not necessarily share white gender expectations" (p. 116). Within southern culture, black women were not allowed to be dependent upon their husbands, and men could not protect their wives. Slave women could, however, appeal to their mistresses' sense of shared female experience to soften the harshness of slavery.

Weiner demonstrates that the ideology of domesticity reinforced the institution of slavery. When a mistress acted within the parameters of the ideology, she developed personal relationships with some female slaves, acted as a mediator with the master, and in small ways lessened the burden of slavery. "By thus ameliorating some of the physical and emotional hardships experienced by slave women," Weiner concludes, "women were the inadvertent agents of paternalism" (p. 88). Slave women also played a role in perpetuating the peculiar institution. By gaining favors from the mistress, providing

some family stability, and creating a sense of community, they "defused discontent" (p. 145).

At the same time, Weiner asserts that both white and black women could be agents of radicalism. White women's assistance to their slaves helped blacks find some sense of human dignity. Black women challenged the dehumanization of slavery by establishing strong families and cultural values.

These contradictory conclusions are illustrative of the frustration in attempting to define the slave experience from a difficult documentary record. Historians of slavery necessarily deal with records left by whites, the anecdotal evidence of scattered contemporary black accounts, and with the WPA slave narratives written many years after the fact. While Weiner provides abundant evidence of the nearly infinite variety of relationships between black and white women, the disparity of experience is so great that one yearns for a means to generalize or even quantify. Mistresses could be generous or demanding, kind or cruel, sympathetic or demeaning; women, both black and white, might be viewed as either conservative or radical; there may or may not have existed empathetic relationships between the races. Describing the common experience of slavery may be an impossible task; Weiner has given us a solid picture, in all its complexity, of the variety of relationships that could exist between white and black women.

Two-thirds of *Mistresses and Slaves* is devoted to the antebellum period, while the last third discusses the Civil War and subsequent years. One wishes for as complete and nuanced a portrait of the latter as the former. Weiner shows a gradual change in the relationship between black and white women. White women slowly developed a deeply-felt resentment and anger toward their former slaves. Unwilling (or untrained) to do their own domestic work, realizing that they could not count on the loyalty of their slaves, and finally facing the humiliation of defeat, white women were confused by their loss of authority and resorted to a level of racism unfamiliar in the antebellum period. Overworked as never before during the war, they were determined at its conclusion to restore their life as much as possible to its antebellum ways. Black women were equally determined to assert their freedom and establish their family's economic security. Thus, in the years after the war, there was little possibility for any sort of gender solidarity or cooperation across racial lines.

Although the title of this book states that it is a study of South Carolina women, Weiner has drawn evidence from other states. In one eighteen-page section (pp. 125-42), for example, the testimonies of slaves from Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama, Texas, and North Carolina are cited. While the endnotes are extensive, the lack of a bibliography makes it difficult to evaluate and follow the sources. Despite this drawback, *Mistresses and Slaves* is a valuable addition to the literature and poses an important new interpretation of the relationships between black and white women.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Virginia J. Laas. Review of Weiner, Marli F., *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2205

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.