Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Monique Moultrie

Nell Irvin Painter. *Soul Murder and Slavery*. Charles Edmondson Historical Lecture Series, No. 15. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1995.

Nell Irvin Painter is the Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University.

Nell Irvin Painter delivered this lecture at Baylor University in April 1993. Painter examines the history of child and sexual abuse present in American slavery and relates it to the notion of "soul murder," a term she adapted from psychiatrist Leonard Shengold's book *Soul Murder: The Effects of Child Abuse and Deprivation* (p.7). Painter explores the notion of soul murder in slavery as the culminated effects of sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, and physical and mental torture, and finds that in enslaved communities where victimization was common, there is a legacy that permeates to present day African-American communities.

Painter highlights the story of Harriet Jacobs as an example of the sexual harassment and sexual abuse that was most likely typical in those times. Starting from this example, she gives other historical narratives of sexual abuse and ponders the psychological damage done to both the slave woman and the master's wife. In examining these responses, she notes that there was a great deal of resentment on both the part of the slave mistresses and slave women in regard to the sexual relationship (whether consensual or non consensual) with the master (p.19).

While she is careful to acknowledge slave women's strength in the face of adversity, her central theme is the slaves' anger, depression, and debased self-worth that is the result of longstanding psychological hurt. Equally important to Painter's thesis is to move past a recapitulation of Stanley Elkins depiction of psychologically crippled blacks. She instead posits that slaves had "two crucial means of support that helped them resist being damaged permanently by the assaults of their owners"—emotional support from slaves' fictive kin relationships and their religious beliefs (p. 21). Slave women's networks were important counterweights to the insults of slavery, because in their own social groupings, women formed bonds that established each other's self-worth. In a literature review of black theologians, Painter notes that scholars like Albert Raboteau, Gayraud Wilmore, and James Cone have argued that slave religion served the particular needs of the people by being both "apocalyptic and reassuring," in that there was hope that God would punish the wicked slaveholders and reward the good slaves (p. 22).

http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/