

**Minrose C. Gwin. *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) vii, 238 pp., \$19.95.**

In this book, Minrose Gwin explores the interrelationships between women as a model of Southern racial experiences. In order to understand “this volatile, often violent connection between black and white women of the Old South,” she examines a wide variety of books including proslavery and abolitionist fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, slave narratives, diaries, and modern fictional versions of the Southern slave experience by Faulkner, Cather and Margaret Walker.

A historian will find the greatest interest in the expositions of “Fictional Sisterhood in a Fictional South” of the nineteenth century, and “Mistress and Slave Woman as Obverse Images.” An analysis of the feminist undercurrents of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, including the strength of the black-white female bond, is most convincing. Even more startling, however, is the uncovering of similar female bonding in *Aunt Phillis’s Cabin*, a polemical proslavery pot boiler. Black women in the Old South were forced to be strong; white women were supposed to appear weak, although many clearly were not. In slave narratives and autobiographies Gwin points out that, in terms of a “wholeness of female identity” (respectability and sexuality), each race had “only half.” The slave narratives are carefully and critically discussed, both as a means of asserting black humanity, and in terms of their remarkably forgiving attitudes towards white mistresses. The ambivalence toward black women, shown in the writings of their white mistresses, is also clear. Although there are many instances of sisterhood in times of trouble, the color barrier generally blinded white women to the humanity of the black woman who was usually perceived in stereotypical terms. It might also be worth remembering that most white women in the South were not slave holders. Did their attitudes differ from those of the upper-class women?

While the analyses of the works of Faulkner, Cather, and Walker are equally interesting, they are far more problematical in terms of the thesis of this work. Cather, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, seems to have been able to recreate the “ambiguity of cross-racial relationships,” but in an essentially nostalgic world in which evil does not wound. Walker, in *Jubilee*, writing during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, seems to regard “black humanism” as an answer to racism. Can the black woman’s saintly forgiveness of the southern white woman’s viciousness really tell us about the slave/mistress experience of the Old South? Or, is it, most likely, a reflection of the hopeful sixties?

The most brilliant chapter of this book is its discussion of the relationship of Clytie and Rosa in *Absalom, Absalom!*, epitomizing both the chasm and the connection between the races. Faulkner seems to have been the author who best explored the failure of human relationships

which occurs when the white woman is unable to accept her black "other," unable to reach across racial barriers. Gwin does not examine the irony that it was a white male, bedeviled by his own racial demons, who was most successful at illuminating the tensions of the "peculiar sisterhood." It might have also been valuable to examine the reasons why most of the great modern black female authors have chosen not to deal with this relationship.

As the author states, her aim was "to open new avenues of inquiry." In this lively and provocative study, she has succeeded admirably in her goal.

—Louise Mayo  
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**John H. Haley. *Charles N. Hunter and Race Relations in North Carolina*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) xii, 352 pp., \$17.95 paper.**

Haley wanted to write a biography of C. N. Hunter, noted black educator/newspaperman/businessman/community leader, but instead he wrote a multilayered work which also included a study of race relations and black history in North Carolina from post-Civil War up to the Great Depression. Hunter was born a slave in 1851 and died a freeman in 1931. His mother died when he was approximately four years old and he was raised by "enlightened" slave masters. Haley's account of Hunter's life leads the reader through a series of disconcerting struggles which are almost storybook in nature. C. N. Hunter comes across as a constantly aspiring, but never quite succeeding, opportunist.

For example, at a rather young age he tries unsuccessfully for public office in antebellum North Carolina and is so demoralized by the experience that he decides never to run for public office again. He instead turns to the use of "Uncle Tom" tactics on certain influential whites to gain leverage or status or employment. In the process of catering to conservative constituencies (both black and white), however, Hunter loses touch with the black movement.

By the end of his life, his personal dreams are only partially fulfilled. For example, he publishes a thirty-four page pamphlet, *Review of Negro Life in North Carolina with My Recollections*, but never the voluminous work he stated was needed and which no one ever funded. In addition, Hunter can be viewed as being a convenient "tool" of separatist thinking whites, a die-hard accommodationist, and in general, a rather unscrupulous, unethical "character" whose first thoughts were of his own survival and status, and only secondly, a concern for the welfare of the