



Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South

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Documenting the difficult class relations between women slaveholders and slave women, this study shows how class and race as well as gender shaped women's experiences and determined their identities. Drawing upon massive research in diaries, letters, memoirs, and oral histories, the author argues that the lives of antebellum southern women, enslaved and free, differed fundamentally from those of northern women and that it is not possible to understand antebellum southern women by applying models derived from New England sources.

Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South Details

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From Reader Review Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South for online ebook

Michael Chernesky says

Genovese is most in her own when it comes to detail, and she paints a lucid tapestry of the on-the-ground experiences of women, black and white, in the antebellum South. A good piece adding color to more significant considerations of the antebellum South, but bereft of historiographical significance considering subsequent developments in considerations of women and race in the South.

Eve says

I really appreciated the political/sociological clarification of the difference between New England homes and Southern households, the Northern roots of the idea of a "woman's sphere" being dependent of the development of men's work away from home. This book is changing the way I read and understand women's diaries from the time, and helping me to begin to grasp the cultural differences between Northern and Southern white women as being certainly bound up with slavery, but also with a whole paternalistic worldview of which slavery is one very important manifestation.

As an exploration of the relationships between white and black women within the Southern household, I feel Fox-Genovese could go more deeply, however. There is so much about the combination of intimacy and brutality that remains opaque.

Graceann says

An in-depth examination of the interwoven lives of Southern women and their female slaves. It isn't all moonlight and magnolias, nor is it all Simon Legree. The text is a bit dry at times, but very informative.

Holly says

While this seems like an interesting and informative book, it was not an easy read. It felt quite choppy in most places. To me, there was no real flow, so after a few chapters, I ended up skimming and finally putting it down. I have another similar read coming via inter-library soon. I hope it is much easier!

Cheryl says

Long read but worth it if you are interested in women's history, slave history, southern history... I read this in graduate school and had to write and present a book analysis for the class. I chose this book. Still one of the best reads I had in grad school.

Jewels says

I found the actual words of the women from that era to be interesting, although I would have preferred a much more balanced view between the black and white women. I understand that slaves rarely kept journals and such, but there were some well educated black women who fought for their peoples' freedom who gave speeches and such that could have been drawn on for this book. The whole subject was just extremely sad, and it was such a shameful era of our country that if I had not had to read this for class, it would not be a topic that I would readily pick up for leisure reading.

Janet says

Tantalizing tastes of Southern womanhood slip between the liberal lace of feminist phraseology as Within the Plantation Household begins with a Prologue. I am torn momentarily between the impulse to drop this book and find instead a complete unedited copy of Sarah Haynesworth Gayle's diary.

Chapter one is more of the same minus the diary excerpts. It is a dry chapter of definitions discussing such terminology as "gender," "race," and "household." I am convinced that the author is not herself a Southerner by comments made regarding Southern architecture compared to the "bourgeois" North. If she was from the South she'd understand that the reason Southern farm/plantation kitchens are designed as separate open buildings behind the family home is because of the heat (and danger of fire).

Southern "homeschooling" is beautifully recounted as regards both white and black women. As a breastfeeding mother/advocate, I was a bit confused by an indiscriminate use of the word "nursing" to describe nannies, babysitting, sick care, breastfeeding, and wet nursing. When the names of the famous Southern plantations pop up in the narrative I find myself craving the original diaries, photographs, oral histories, and documents. Edited excerpts and editorial speculations are a tease to real lives recorded in their original voices.

Cotton growing, picking, carding, spinning, weaving and sewing awaken my slumbering desire to experience these aspects of daily life as my ancestors did.....but have you any idea how much a spinning wheel costs these days? Unbelievable! I'm relieved that my clothes today are not dependent upon my talent with the loom. Yet I still hope to learn and pass down these lost arts to my daughters in some small way.

The culture of slavery is at once mysterious and repulsive. If we are historically from the South, we inherently wonder about the how and the why. If our forefathers were slave owners we speculate about what sort of masters/men they were. If babies in the family were spaced closely together the question of wet nursing arises and one ponders a culture that delegates vital maternal functions to an enslaved race. And what has become of the black folk, whose lives were intertwined with those of the plantation families? What responsibility is owed the past? Perhaps it is to remember, to learn, and to commit to record.

In conclusion, can anyone today really know and understand what life was like for women on Southern plantations? We can try and thus this book is worth the exploration and is further motivation for study and experiential womanly research.

Susan Stans says

Finally, I finished the book. Took me forever. I recommend this for scholars who are interested in the Civil War and the relationship between female slaveholders and female slaves. Very well researched. Reads more like a dissertation.

Diane says

This book contrasts the experiences of black and white women in the pre-Civil War South. It contains a great deal of information on a subject that doesn't get all that much attention. I learned a lot from the book and enjoyed it. However, the style is very academic and dense, so I would only recommend it to readers who are very interested in learning about the period.

Jeff says

Some of it took some serious slogging through sociology lingo and was pretty dull going, but it was interesting.

Michael says

An account of the lives of antebellum slave owning women and black slaves within the plantation household setting. Fox-Genovese uses primarily diaries and letters as her source material to recreate the women's' culture of this particular environment.

In the Prologue, she shows that elite white women are able to develop an identity because they had intense and uninterrupted familial ties and networks of friends to buoy them up in hard times (p. 11). Much of this identity, however, was dependant upon the support given them by their husbands. This is at least the case with Sarah Gayle (p. 12).

Slave-holding was a very important source of the sense of self for women like Sarah Gayle. Despite the close bonds which Sarah develops with Mike and Rose, two of her slaves (p. 26), the proximity of living conditions also led to friction, as was the case with Hampton (p. 23). Sarah Gayle benefited from the slave system. Likeable though she was, she was complicit in maintaining the slaveocracy (p. 27).

Suzanne Lebsock, "Complicity and Contention: Women in the Plantation South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LXXIV (1990), 59-83; and reply by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, pp. 369-371.

Lebsock finds untold contradictions in Fox-Genovese's logic. She finds her sources and scope all too limited for the conclusions drawn (p. 62). She dismisses her "theory of identity" for black women as ambiguous (p. 66). The biggest problem, though, is her simplistic thinking on where white slave-holding women stood on slavery (p. 73). She has subjected these poor women to an unreasonable test of "ideological purity" (p. 75),

and as a result missed the nuanced moral struggle that people like Mary Chestnut had with the idea of slavery in favor of the "honorary man" Louisa McCord (p. 78). Women responded to slavery in a way that was different from men. That is true for both white and black women. Gender is a useful category, if one that needs to be employed with greater subtlety when class loyalties and race come into play.

Yaaresse says

Some things to bear in mind when approaching this book:

1. Its publication date. At the time it was written, this was ground-breaking stuff. Actually focus on the lives of female slaves and their white female owners? Whoa, Nelly, pass the smelling salts!
2. It is an academic work. The author is a sociologist whose focus is feminism and slavery in the US pre-Civil War era. This is not a prettied up historical fiction; it is historical research. (Or, rather, the result of historical research.) It's going to be a little dry compared to something like *The Invention of Wings*. It's also going to be a lot more factual.

Personally, I thought it was fascinating and well-written. Like a lot of books written by self-identified feminists, it can come off a little angry and pontifical in places, but that was to be expected given the author's credentials and bias.

Erika says

The book talked more about slaveowners' perspective than the slaves, so I found myself often wondering how the slaves thought about something. I had to get used to the academic writing style; the book was a little drier than I like, but it was informative.

Samuel says

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explores the female perspective and experience of living in the Old South: incorporating sources that speak to both black and white women. To be completely candid, there does not seem to be very much innovative or surprising here, but I am fairly confident that this is because I do not understand the historiography. Written in 1988, it is quite possible that everything she is saying is being said by a historian for the first time, and that women's perspective in the antebellum South was new territory: source and topic-wise.

The antebellum plantation household was viewed by its inhabitants as "a community and a business rolled into one" (103). Whereas in the North, families lived under one roof, in the South (at least on plantations), there were many roofs/buildings that comprised the diverse occupants segregated by race, gender, and marital status--not to mention many other roofs/structures given over to farming and domestic chores. Women played an indispensable role in managing (and reproducing) the plantation household and its culture. White mothers took the responsibility of teaching their children manners and literacy, but left much of the physical raising and protecting to black house slaves (111). The author makes it clear that the relationship between white and black women was complicated; there were indeed many cases where they were thought of as one "white and black family" and sincere mourning at the death of slaves (both a loss of property--capital--and a human/friend), but the jealousy, dominion, and social consequences of slavery also made for some

serious tensions within the plantation household.

The Old South had distinct gender conventions from the North that guided women's behaviors and identities (194). Women were relegated to a "kindlier sphere" than the political, business worlds left to men (195). The paleness of skin was viewed as especially desirable in the south for its racial-moral assumptions. Fashion was used to display class but within reason; extravagance was an understood faux pas. But the gender conventions held radical differences across race and class lines. But even the slaveholding plantation ladies expressed their frustration in not being able to distinguish between appearance and substance, or outward manners and inner character, especially when trying to help select daughter-in-laws. Southern culture had a great desire to be outwardly happy even at the expense of inward chaos and turmoil: women and their tales make this abundantly clear.

(pp. 37-145, 192-241)

Sue says

I know that some historians have issues with this book, but I love it. I love the snippets from diaries to give the subjects a voice, and I love how economics creeps in to give more texture to understanding class, race, and gender relations. Fox-Genovese doesn't try to tell the 'whole' story of race and gender in the south, the focus is on plantation life, but it is still an interesting read.
