

Katie Smart
Thinking Gender 2012

“De old devil!”:
Female Slaveholders, Violence, and Slave Management in Louisiana

“My dam old missis was mean as hell,” former slave Henrietta Butler announced in a 1940 interview. Butler was born in Bayou Lafourche, Louisiana, sometime before 1860. At the time of the interview, she was unsure of both her birth date and her age. “I was born in slavery,” she stated, “I’m not ashamed to tell it either, and known somethin’ about it.” Butler witnessed horrendous atrocities during her time as a slave on the Haidee plantation in Louisiana. Emily Haidee, her mistress, forced Butler’s mother to conceive children with enslaved men on the plantation and then sold Henrietta Butler’s brothers, while her sisters remained to work on the same plantation. Butler revealed that she was also made to “have a baby by one of dem mens on de plantation.” Butler’s baby died during the Civil War and Emily Haidee gave Butler no option but to suckle Haidee’s own child, “I had to let dat old devil’s baby suck dese same tiddies hanging right here.” Emily Haidee, “De old devil!” as Henrietta Butler saw her, interacted violently with her slaves on a daily basis and in a variety of ways.¹

Plantation mistresses used violence on a daily basis to manage and control enslaved people on their plantations. In all the seminal works on slavery, the voices of slaveholding women are noticeably silent. The brutal system of slavery, despite the implication by the historiography, involved female slaveholders in addition to male slaveholders. Moreover, the sources suggest that plantation mistresses were comfortable with their role as enforcers of order through violence, even before the transformation and upheaval of Southern society when the

¹ Henrietta Butler in Ronnie W. Clayton, ed., *Mother Wit: Ex-slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers’ Project* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 38.

commencement of the Civil War compelled white women to take control of plantations, large numbers of slaves, and the continued maintenance of Southern slave society.

These realities were evident in Louisiana in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a unique place during this time because of the nature of the slave system and the civil law in place. Louisiana and its laws are exceptional and pose a significant challenge to the study of female slaveholders. Since the Louisiana territory was under Spanish, French, and British rule throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and did not become United States territory until 1803, it poses extraordinary challenges in understanding the nature of the slave system, its relation to the government, and its change over time. Additionally, the civil laws in Louisiana were unlike any other Southern state. Under articles 173 and 3522 of the Louisiana Civil Code of 1825, it was illegal for slaveholders of any gender to brutally beat or kill their slaves and women were given the right to own and manage plantations. These laws complicate the role of the government in the continuation of slavery, as well as the function that plantation mistresses and violence played in the lives of the enslaved before and during the Civil War. Because of these factors, female slaveholders in Louisiana were managers of plantations well before the Civil War.²

Historian Eugene Genovese argued in his seminal work on slavery, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, “The black and white women of the Big House needed each other.” Genovese’s argument in the 1970s strengthened the notion of a dynamic and multidimensional relationship between slaveholding women and their slaves. This relationship is important to understand how women in the slave South, both black and white, worked, lived, fought, and

² *Civil Code of the State of Louisiana: Preceded by the Treaty of Cession with France, the Constitution of the United States of America, and the State* (Paris, France: Impr. de E. Duverger, 1825), 90-91, 229, 710.

negotiated boundaries. Ultimately, Genovese believed that slaveholding women were a central and humanizing force in the lives of slaves—even though he termed the Big House a “battlefield.” The intimate relationship between plantation mistresses and their slaves “bred affection and warmth,” but “it also bred hatred and violence.” The sources presented from former slave, Henrietta Butler, plantation mistress, Tryphene Blanche Holder Fox, and my research all suggest there was more hatred and violence and less affection and warmth than Genovese believed.³

Tryphena Fox, one female slaveholder, complained daily of her increased work load because of slave management. Fox lived most of her adult life in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, but was born and raised in Massachusetts. She moved south to Mississippi in 1852 to be a tutor but quickly married a physician who treated slaves on Louisiana sugar plantations. Consequently, Fox embraced the life of the Southern planter elite and emitted strong racial prejudices and comments on the role of slaves in Southern society. In an 1859 letter to her mother, Fox wrote of a slave, Susan, who recently became her “greatest annoyance.” “When I needed her most with seven in the family she would do nothing for two weeks because she had a little sore on her finger—the more there was to be done the more she shirked always,” Fox complained. Fox, clearly benefitting from slave labor (in the same letter, Fox mentions having time to complete a novel), spent much of her letter to her mother criticizing Susan and her apparent laziness.⁴

Arguably, Tryphena Fox’s greatest struggle was managing her slaves. She complained incessantly to her mother about her slaves and wrote a letter detailing her daily dealings with

³ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 343, 361.

⁴ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 1856-1876* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), ix-xiv; Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 13 June 1859 in King, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 89.

another hired slave, Maria. “I sent [Maria] into the parlor to make a fire & arrange the room. She was gone a long time & when I went to see if she was not most done & ready to make a fire in Aunt Ellen’s room, not a thing was touched & she lay sprawled out on the hearth-rug *fast asleep*.” Later in that day, Fox’s troubles with Maria continued:

I ordered her to make haste & wash the supper dishes, she left them until within a few minutes of nine, when we began to talk of retiring & I went to the back door to see if everything was right & in good order for the night, all the buildings shut up & the keys brought in—what should I find but all the dirty dishes standing untouched & she in the kitchen talking to Susan.

Principally, Fox’s critiques of her slaves demonstrate how deeply rooted her racism and prejudices were and the constant presence of slave resistance. She portrays her slaves as lazy, chatty, constantly shirking responsibilities and duties, and undermining what she saw as a simple goal: to keep the plantation running smoothly. Moreover, the letter reveals that Fox was in charge of delegating tasks to slaves inside the household not just once, but throughout the day. Finally, it is apparent that Fox managed more than household tasks and slaves. She controlled the keys to the plantation buildings, supervised the day’s end, and closing up of the buildings. This domestic management was by no means as tiresome or difficult as she described, nor as time- and energy-consuming as the work in which she engaged her slaves. The fact that Fox dealt with delinquent slaves is a testament to the slaves’ own ability to carve out a moment of relief for themselves through acts of resistance, for Fox focused most of her attention on successfully managing slaves.⁵

Tryphena Fox, struggle as she did in the daily management of her slaves, did not tolerate misbehavior from them. Fox punished Maria for her nap on the rug in front of the fireplace early that morning and upon seeing the unwashed dishes, decided again to punish Maria. “I disliked to

⁵ Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 29 March 1861, in King, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 115.

say anything to her master he whips her so severely,” Fox wrote, “so I punished her again myself—not very severely & she promised to do better for she had troubled me all week. I thought no more about it but went to bed.” Though Fox acknowledged that Maria’s master whipped her “severely,” she argued that her punishment was more acceptable. The next morning, Fox discovered Maria missing: “[Maria] made up her bed in the hall, but the next morning when called she was missing having got out through the Office window, the only place that was left unlocked.” Maria once again utilized a form of resistance to counteract Fox’s violent discipline. She left the plantation in self-defense and a pursuit of some degree of freedom, and Fox was left to manage the plantation with one less slave than the day before. Maria’s escape would be only temporary, and she was discovered in a hiding place several months after fleeing from Fox’s household.⁶

The influence of female slaveholders needed to spread farther than segregated geographic boundaries, especially outside the confines of the plantation house. Tryphena Fox and her slave, Maria, are a good example of this influence. When Maria escaped through an open office window, Fox noted, “some men helped her out, for we found their tracks under the window in the soft mud. We have had a good many different reports about her, but all attempts to find her have proved failures.” Maria was gone for six months before Fox’s husband found her in a carriage driver’s quarters on another plantation. “She has been severely whipped, and has come back evidently resolved to do her best that she can,” Fox mentioned in her diary. “As to her being a run-away, we have forgiven and shall forget.” Because Maria left with the help of other slaves, disappeared, and spent her six-month absence hidden by other slaves on a different plantation, she undercut Fox’s power and influence both within the household and outside. It would be hard

⁶ Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 29 March 1861, in King, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 115.

to argue that Maria's truancy did not affect how other slaves viewed Fox, her managerial techniques, and her power to control slaves on the plantation. Maria slept outside Fox's door and still managed to steal away for several months time. Who was to say that other slaves could not get away with those actions, as well? Fox's power over her slaves was directly related to how she managed them. Managing slaves was a troublesome business, but it was necessary for slaveholding women to partake in its difficulty, and most did.⁷

At the commencement of the Civil War, while men left their homes in overwhelming numbers and left women in charge of running plantations, households, and slaves. Husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, extended family members, neighbors, and overseers were either in short supply or strikingly absent from the lives of female slaveholders. Women in Louisiana, contrary to the historiography, were well prepared for the task of running plantations, controlling slaves, and maintaining the system of slavery for just a little longer. This proved especially true in Louisiana where, because of the law, women managed and controlled slaves for several decades. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust, however, wrote that "slave management was not an opportunity white southern women eagerly sought" and that during the Civil War, women were forced to manage slaves in the absence of men. Women, she believed, saw this as a deplorable, unwanted, and trying task. While many female slaveholders complained incessantly about their delinquent slaves, managing slaves was a necessity, a crucial task they had to undertake both before and during the Civil War, one they were readily prepared for. Slaveholding women used their experience and knowledge of discipline, violence, slave and plantation management to oversee the continuation of slavery throughout the Civil War.⁸

⁷ Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 29 March 1861, in King, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 115-116; Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, Diary Transcript, 12 August 1861, in *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 133n.

⁸ Drew Gilpin Faust, "Trying to Do a Man's Business," 176.

