



Book Reviews

Teri McMurry-Chubb, *Race Unequals: Overseer Contracts, White Masculinities, and the Formation of Managerial Identity in the Plantation Economy* (Lexington Books, 2021), 148 pages.

In academic studies of the southern plantation, the overseer is often portrayed in simple terms as a lower-class white male who did not himself own land or enslaved persons. Departing from these one-dimensional descriptions, McMurry-Chubb illustrates the plantation overseer in a much more granular way. In this lucid and engaging monograph, she shows how public and private law helped construct the overseer's masculine identity in a way that both elevated the social status of elite planter males, and lowered the status of the enslaved people the overseer managed. The overseer's performance of masculinity was assigned a value (lower than the planter, higher than the enslaved) "based on the imperatives of capitalist and white supremacist structures" (xiii)—another iteration of Du Bois's critical concept of the "wage of whiteness" and its tendency to undermine class consciousness.

To develop her powerful theory of the overseer's masculinity, McMurry-Chubb draws upon employment contracts entered into between overseers and plantation owners, which she located in the papers of several plantations in southern slave-holding states. She also relies upon public laws—statutes governing the conduct of the enslaved and their owners—and court cases in which overseers litigated employment claims against plantation owners. Her exhaustive research produces a robust dataset from which she crafts riveting descriptions and examples.

In the first chapter, McMurry-Chubb exposes the class striations within the plantation economy, in which only elite southern planters, the proverbial "one percent" who owned five or more enslaved persons, enjoyed upper-class status. Everyone else was consigned to a lower social station. In terms of the legal context, McMurry-Chubb explains common-law contract concepts as they existed in antebellum times and shows how contracts moved from a simplistic focus on the transfer of title to a performance-based obligation, under which free people transferred an ownership right in their conduct. Also in this chapter, McMurry-Chubb describes how financialization operated within the plantation economy. The enslaved not only contributed all their uncompensated labor, but also planters were able to secure credit based on the future labor that could be extracted from their bodies. This chilling type of credit, along with factoring in arrangements for future cotton crops, was required for plantations to operate on a year-to-year basis.

In the remaining chapters of the book, we learn how private law (in the form of employment contracts) and public law (in the form of state slave codes) constructed the overseer's identity as masculine and white, yet still far beneath the planter's masculine whiteness. Deftly synthesizing her source materials, McMurry explains how overseer employment contracts required the overseer to work long hours, overseeing the running of the plantation and the labor of the enslaved. Firmly ensconced in a laissez-faire approach to employment relations during this time, US labor law lacked any limits on work hours or any safety regulations. State statutes required overseers to live on the plantation, further tying the overseer's labor to the planter's property—the land and the enslaved people who worked it. While the enslaved were subjected to constant surveillance by white men,

“overseers subjected themselves to the same by taking contractual responsibility for the planter’s economic return” (43).

McMurtry-Chubb exposes the large cultural gap between the lower-class overseer, who was considered brutish and prone to vice, and the plantation owner, who was assumed to adhere to sterling moral standards. As part of their contract, overseers were obligated to care for and aid enslaved persons who fell ill on the plantation. This requirement of care cemented the overseer’s role as caretaker for the planter’s human property, and further separated his type of masculinity from the planter’s masculinity. Further, in contrast to the overseer, who was contractually not allowed to lavishly entertain and who was not considered educated, planters were cast as men of the world who frequently entertained guests and participated in the highest affairs of society, especially law and politics. Planters were so concerned with the overseer’s purported proclivity toward excess that many contracts mandated the overseer’s complete abstinence from alcohol. We can see remnants of these divisions in Southern culture today. In upper-class white southern culture, alcohol is condoned, part and parcel of “entertaining,” but in middle-class and lower-class white southern culture, particularly among evangelical Christians, abstinence is the norm.

The most disquieting part of McMurtry-Chubb’s book is her third chapter, in which she explains how the overseer’s managerial labor, coupled with his clerical skills, created an efficient, but violent, method of extracting value from the enslaved and from the land. The “pushing system” of gang labor forced enslaved people to work at the pace set by the most productive person on the line—and if someone could not keep up, the result was whipping, maiming, and sometimes death. From the detailed records kept on the plantations, we see that all able-bodied enslaved people performed back-breaking labor, including children as young as eight years old.

Thus, capitalism’s obsession with efficiency and the division of labor, conventionally understood in twentieth-century scholarship as Taylorism or Fordism, began in a more brutish form in the plantation slave economy. Despite the overall view that overseers were not well-educated, they possessed enough numeracy and organizational skills to plan and organize the plantation’s labor and farming operations. Best-selling overseer and plantation management manuals popularized the methods for achieving the largest possible profits from the labor and the land. The overseer applied clerical skills to place a return-on-investment number on each body of the enslaved, based on how much cotton they were able to pick and cotton’s market price for that year. The overseer also calculated how much cotton an enslaved person had to pick to overcome the tax assessment placed on their body. But the overseer’s white-collar skills, while part of his masculinity, were not as potent as the planter’s masculinity. As slavery ended, Lost Cause theorists began to construct the figure of the heroic white woman who took over much of the overseer’s role during the civil war (102). As the southern industrial economy was supplanted by a service economy, white-collar clerical work would become feminized as “pink collar” labor.

By the end of this book, the reader fully comprehends that “[t]he discipline of modern management began in the cotton fields of the antebellum south” (34). Capitalists have always tried to create workflow systems that decrease the autonomy and diminish the craft of the workers, to keep labor costs down, as classically detailed in Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. With enslavement, the overseer easily accomplished these goals, using whips, guns, and dogs to drive the labor, and entering data in records and ledgers to account for the profits. McMurtry-Chubb asks us

to consider how much of this efficiency fueled by white supremacy has survived in our modern labor practices.

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