

Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, And Businesses In Virginia, 1680-1860

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Review

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Oast, Jennifer *Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680-1860*. Cambridge University Press, \$99.99
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The Institutions of a Slave Society

In the summer of 1835, it came to the attention of the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors that a slave was living in the Rotunda. The university owned or rented several slaves, one of whom had evidently decided to settle in a room near the chemistry lab. The Board insisted that the man move out and that the room be "properly cleansed,...locked up, or put to other desirable uses" (178). The building, Jennifer Oast argues, was thought to be too central to the landscape of the university, too closely identified with it, for a slave to use any part of it as his living quarters. The Rotunda appears on the cover of Oast's *Institutional Slavery* as a signifier of the churches, businesses, and colleges of Virginia that were deeply invested and implicated in slavery. The building has also, of course, been bathed in torchlight recently, in media images of white supremacists shouting violent slogans at student protestors. Often cited as an architectural gem, the Rotunda is a physical reminder of the pervasiveness of slavery and the difficulty of grappling with and eradicating its legacies.

Oast's book is an invaluable text in illustrating how slavery dug itself so deeply into American life. She tackles what she terms institutional slavery, the plight of human beings in bondage, whether owned or hired, to "a group of people united in a common purpose—nonprofit educational and religious organizations, the public (as organized into state government), and for-profit companies" (3). These slaves labored for such institutions, or they were hired out to swell endowments and operating budgets. Oast's work details the often-overlooked stories of these people, and it presents a clearly-argued double-pronged thesis: that institutional slavery expanded the circle of beneficiaries of bondage and enhanced its power; and that, while slaveholders

defended themselves with assertions of their paternalism, they regularly violated its tenets in the service of philanthropic generosity to white communities. The success of charitable endeavors in the South was also the history of the exploitation of slaves. “From its earliest years,” Oast establishes, “the leaders of Virginia yoked educational philanthropy to bound labor” (126). Oast’s work paints a finely-textured picture of the reality of what Ira Berlin termed a slave society, a society in which slavery dictated relationships of every degree of power and intimacy.

As Oast points out, we need more monographic studies that tackle the varying experiences of enslaved people; depicting the realities of their lives should enhance rather than diminish the gravity of the moral reckoning we must make with this history. Her regular references to Jonathan Martin’s *Divided Mastery* in the footnotes parallel my own experience of the relative paucity of scholarship on regular practices like the hiring of slaves. Oast faithfully traces the consequences of institutional bondage for those who lived in it. While some people who lived and worked in college or university settings managed to attain literacy or to facilitate communication with family members sold away, others experienced the dangers of annual hiring, which might mean violence, malnutrition, separation from family, and other attendant horrors. Oast traces demographically the potentially lethal dangers of this constant hiring. Particularly striking is Oast’s documentation of the premium placed on the purchase of young women for institutions, since they would be able to reproduce human capital. She follows communities of slaves seemingly connected through generations back to a few founding mothers (63-5). Using close readings of records, she compellingly reconstructs the ways in which slaves found themselves caught between representatives of the institutions that owned or hired them in battles of authority (139-40). Her examination of the roles of slaves in colleges and universities offers a useful complement to Daina Ramey Berry’s *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, which follows the lives of slaves who acquired the corpses of black people as research subjects for early medical schools. The man who lived in the Rotunda had apparently selected his room for its proximity to science classrooms and workspaces, suggesting, Oast points out, that some slaves held positions of skill and responsibility (152, 177). But similar positions came with demands that slaves serve as emissaries into the world of the dead, where black corpses were valuable commodities.

The idea that inequality would continue after death was perfectly logical in the society that Oast brings to life. Her well-documented study of one particular

aspect of the slave-holding South should illuminate the workings and assumptions of a culture that was so deeply committed to the tenets of human bondage that its primacy touched every part of daily life. Her study of slaves hired into industries like mining and manufacturing joins other significant work on the topic and expands our understanding of this facet of slave experience. But her work on educational and religious institutions viscerally demonstrates just how deeply entrenched human bondage was in the antebellum South. The board of trustees at Hollins College, she points out, considered altering the school calendar to have the long break over the winter, so that conducting classes would not conflict with the annual period for slave hiring (194). Oast points out that this proposal was aired in 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. A world without slaves, a world in which slavery was not the central fact around which all else revolved, seemed impossible even then. Slaves kept Virginia's educational and religious institutions functioning, a reality that Oast describes poignantly. But their labor also funded the philanthropic missions of the organizations that owned them. The circles of people who did not themselves hold slaves but who benefitted from slavery thus expanded. Planters and manufacturers who were able to exploit a readily available labor pool of slaves for hire, poor white families who bid for the chance to take care of elderly institutional slaves, hoping to profit by spending less on upkeep than they were paid, poor white students who attended school on scholarships funded with endowments generated by slave labor—all these people benefitted. All of them were invested in slavery. And all of their advantages were bought with the pain and fear of human beings. One Hampden-Sydney student, typical of young white university men trying out their power as potential masters, wrote to his sister that he felt “like killing” every time he saw one of the college slaves (173). Many church and school officials, Oast argues, were invested in their vision of themselves as paternalists, and a minority of them expressed concern at the dangers slaves faced when confronted with people like the student. More frequent were those like the Reverend Samuel Gray, who expressed his own unconflicted version of paternalism after he had beaten his slave Jack to death: what had happened was “unfortunate Chance which I would not Should have happened in my family for three times his price...but it is past Cure and such Accidents will happen now and then” (31).

In her discussion of William and Mary, Oast notes that she is depicting the environment in which Thomas Roderick Dew and other proslavery intellectuals worked. These are the people and circumstances they saw every day. These

kinds of connections between how white Southerners justified and explained and understood the world they lived in and how black Southerners endured and built lives and communities in bondage are invaluable. This book helps shed light on how deep those connections ran and reinforces our moral obligation to examine them and their ongoing legacies.

Katherine Mooney is assistant professor of history at Florida State University and author of Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack (Harvard, 2014).