

Visualizing Freedom



Michael A. Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 272 pp., paperback, \$19.95.

Michael Chaney's *Fugitive Vision* emphasizes the relationship between the literary character of slave narratives and the iconic images that often accompanied those narratives in the form of frontispieces, illustrations, or panoramas. His attention to both the visual *and* the verbal elements of African American culture challenges and complicates the now-classic studies of slave

narrative that tend to highlight the mastery of literacy as the key to self-mastery and, thus, liberty.

Fugitive Vision begins with an icon of black subjection, the generic graphic image often attached to print advertisements for the capture and return of runaways. Several scholars have suggested that these icons and their attendant texts did more than serve as a means to repossess fugitive property; they also served to help define the relations between fugitives and their putative owners as relations of mastery and subordination. Such images, Chaney argues, also typify public representations of black bodies by white abolitionists who rely on the paired tyranny of slaveholders and subjugation of the enslaved to further their otherwise noble aims. This representational strategy poses a predicament for ex-fugitives seeking a "more appropriate symbol for either the slave or slavery" (3). Chaney asks, how could ex-fugitives help to create an abolitionist public without making themselves "*permanent* subjects of subjection" (6; emphasis in original)?

Chaney answers these questions in six chapters. Rather than constructing an elaborate theoretical underpinning for the book as a whole or for each chapter individually, Chaney restores the texts and images under consideration to rich and specific contexts. By dispensing with the notion that there is a master text or a master figure capable of standing for fugitive or free African-America, Chaney's analytic strategy parallels the experiences and perspectives of his subjects. He reveals multiple freedoms and multiple Americas, African and otherwise.

The point is most clearly articulated in the last chapter, on Dave the Potter, an enslaved artisan in late-antebellum South Carolina whose wares were—and still are—valued for their function and their beauty. Chaney shows how Dave used his craft to offer an ironic commentary on his own position as a commodity. While each of the jugs (themselves commodities) produced by Dave bears the initials of his owner Lewis Miles, they also carry Dave's signature and poetry in the form of couplets. Here Dave couples the verbal (poetry and signature) with the visual (the jug itself) to turn the jug from *mere* commodity into art and himself into simultaneously slave and master. By mastering *his* craft and signing *his* wares, Dave effectively claims the status of an artisan who exists in addition to and in tension with "the slave" possessed by Lewis Miles. As Chaney's subtle argument suggests, Dave challenges his own commodity status by embracing commodity production and exchange. "Dave's jars—to riff on [Frederick] Douglass—seem to say, 'Now you will see how a thing can turn nothing into something and back again'," Chaney writes, blurring the boundaries between thing and nothing, between Dave, his craft, and his pots (208).

Taken together, Chaney's case studies suggest that African American identities emerged in part out a series of verbal and visual substitutions and redirections, processes through which individuals redefined their own experiences and the larger worlds in which they lived. Each of Chaney's figures

masterfully combines spoken or written words with visual figures (images, bodies, pottery) to create new identities for themselves, while troubling the old identities largely imposed upon them. For example, Dave, through his signature, redirects the gazes of consumers from his slave status to his status as master craftsman. Likewise, Chaney claims that Frederick Douglass employs maternal memories as an "act of self-creation" (18). He points out how Douglass recounts the death of his mother in his infancy in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) but claims to remember his mother in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). More important for Chaney's purposes is the fact that Douglass frames his later memory of his mother by citing an image of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II from the American School ethnologist James C. Pritchard's *The Natural History of Man* (1848). Douglass substitutes the ethnologist's image of Ramses II for his mother, ironically remembering her and revising white supremacist ethnological classification. Chaney argues that Douglass ultimately claims a connection to a historical past that the ethnologists typically deny.

Throughout *Fugitive Vision* Chaney foregrounds African American strategies of substitution and redirection of the kind exemplified by Douglass's citation. In Chapter Two, for example, he describes how William Wells Brown demolished sentimental Anglo-American images of female slavery at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, pairing a satirical cartoon, *The Virginian Slave* alongside Hiram Powers's classically rendered statue, *The Greek Slave* (1844). Where contemporaries suggested that *The Greek Slave* served as an allegory of the appropriate moral response of women to tyranny generally, Brown attempts to redirect their imaginations to the United States particularly (54). In forcing viewers to contend with a black female body next to a column draped with an American flag on a pedestal decorated with whips and chains and the Latin inscription "*e pluribus unum*," he satirizes the classical gestures of both Powers's statue and antebellum U.S. democracy.

Chaney's reading of William and Ellen Craft's slave narrative, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), further explores these strategies. The two fugitive authors recount how Ellen takes on the identity of a white slaveholder traveling with "his" slave (William) in order to ensure both Crafts' fugitive journey to freedom. The narrative (and their actual escape) is full of ironic substitutions. The frontispiece of the book portrays Ellen in drag as a white man who, we learn from the narrative, is illiterate. When Ellen's identity as a white slave-owner is questioned while the two attempt to board a north-bound train, the presence of her husband (passing as her slave) supports her claim to white masculinity and, Chaney argues, her right to mobility. Again Chaney focuses on the productive tension between the narrative, which emphasizes William's practical mastery of literacy, and the frontispiece, which embodies Ellen's physical mastery of the codes of white masculinity. Though they operate on quite different registers, Chaney argues that they are complementary performances. He writes, "Although the planter Ellen Craft pretends to be [is illiterate] ... the authenticating power of proximity to blackness nonetheless ensures resemblance to patriarchy ... suggesting that racial privilege depends

more on upon difference and the appurtenances of domination than on essentiality" (109). Ironically, it is the Crafts' mastery of mastery that undoes the putative logic of racial mastery itself.

As may be indicated by my citations of Chaney's text and description of his analysis, *Fugitive Vision* is by no means an easy read. It cites a number of French theorists and is trenchantly interdisciplinary, relying on insights from scholars of literature, history, and visual culture and critical theorists of race and African American identities. In engaging in this kind of wide-ranging scholarship, Chaney takes seriously the imperatives of "fugitive vision." Remembering that "fugitive" is an adverb as well as a noun and that one of its meanings is "moving from place to place" (OED, 1989), Chaney moves to wherever is necessary to see how African American fugitives struggled to gain freedom for themselves as individuals, families, and a people. At the same time, he resolutely attends to the multiple strategies and positions they adopted to do so. Through both moves he complicates monolithic notions of African American (or, implicitly, any other American) culture and identity, while also foregrounding a shared African American struggle for freedom. In Chaney's *Fugitive Vision*, "*e pluribus unum*" means a common goal and shared strategies—not uniform voices or identities.

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