



Janet Neary. *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 222p., ill. ISBN 9780823272891. US\$ 27.00 (paperback), US\$ 95.00 (hardcover).

I have written a number of reviews, but rarely do I crack open a book to review and immediately become so immersed that I have trouble putting the book down. Only a couple pages in, I found myself scribbling notes in the margins, asking questions, and tying the subject matter to my own research and exhibitions. *Fugitive Testimony* is interdisciplinary, comparing and contrasting historical slave narratives and narratives in contemporary art. Neary compares not only the content of the narratives, but also their structure and logic, creating an absorbing study that sits at the intersection of bibliography, literary history, and art history / theory.

Neary's introduction offers an information-rich foundation that informs the rest of the book, which moves between what she calls "contemporary visual slave narratives" (eg. Glenn Ligon's *Narratives* series, Kara Walker's silhouettes, Driscoll's *The Loophole of Retreat*) and historic slave narratives, including Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, and Keckly's *Behind the Scenes*. The introductory remarks are essential; they give the reader a thorough overview of the concepts she tackles later on. Neary's work breaks new ground, and the quality of her writing makes it a pleasure to walk with her on that ground.

Fugitive Testimony is in conversation with scholars including Marcy Dinius and Maurice Wallace, who argued for the links between written literacy and visual literacy. Neary builds on their "identification of the inextricability of print and visual culture" (8), but with a focus on textual visuality as an integral part of the slave narrative, rather than the conversation between image and text as separate entities within a work.

She argues that slave narrators often used textual visuality to present their stories in ways that subvert power relationships, using evocative imagery to elicit sympathy for narrators. Humanizing the narrator also lent authority to the story by challenging societal assumptions that the narrator is less of a person because of race. In this sense, Neary builds on John Sekora's argument that the black message had to be packaged in a white envelope, but her framing of this packaging as largely visual, and her connecting the historical and contemporary visual logics is unique.



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The book is information-dense, but still readable, making it useful to both seasoned researchers and students (graduate and advanced undergraduate) who might be encountering these ideas for the first time. Neary concludes her work by explicitly tying conversations about agency and the dominant gaze to contemporary debates about racism and racial violence taking place outside the world of contemporary art. In the most general terms, Neary invites us to consider race, power, and the gaze in contemporary America, a critical question for contemporary humanities and social science scholarship.

Julia Skinner
Kennesaw State University