



Britt Rusert. *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*. America and the Long 19th Century Series. New York: New York University Press, 2017. xiv + 293 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4798-4766-2.

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Untitled [Raphael Uchôa on *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*]

Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture discusses science as a form of resistance to dominant scientific discourses. More precisely, it explores resistance through science and art in a slave society. It is an excellent work conducted in the spirit of “history from below.” The book draws its methodological approach from global history to examine racial science as a vector for a transatlantic analysis. It also deals with popular science, and history of science and medicine. This multilayered work provides excellent insights on the history of anthropology and book history, and set against the background of traditional ethnology, argues that African descendants mobilized “fugitive science,” which is examined throughout. The three main modes of fugitive science include oppositional, practical (or a somewhat mundane form of science), and speculative science. The book provides a fundamental foundation from which to explore the interplay between literature and the history of science through integration with literary studies.

Author Britt Rusert weaves a complex and dramatic tapestry from traces of nineteenth-century racial and antiracial science. The book espe-

cially focuses on the antebellum period, when science was practiced by unforeseen actors in unlikely settings. It traces the history of African American activists, writers, physicians, performers, and artists who combined different forms of resistance to combat slavery and slave-society values in nineteenth-century America. This is accomplished by analyzing how these actors mobilized different forms of scientific knowledge to produce alternative discourses during the emancipation struggle. In the author’s words, *Fugitive Science* traces the “ways that African Americans resisted and critiqued racial science throughout the nineteenth century” (p. 227). It further traces a “subterranean history of experiments and practices that both linked racial science to abolitionism across the Atlantic and mobilized popular science in more fleeting acts of resistance” (p. 18).

A central methodological strategy to elucidate the notion of fugitive science is the conceptualization of popular science as excluded from the ranks of professional science. In this regard, Rusert observes that it was precisely within the space of nonprofessional science that African Americans challenged the ascendancy of racial science while

enacting a fugitive science: that is, a furtive science and praxis. In Rusert's view, this "suggested ways that a wide array of popular sciences were linked to emancipation struggles" (p. 18).

Rusert thus informs readers that fugitive science emerged outside mainstream North American science, which was then represented by the so-called American school of ethnology. In this sense, the book draws on traditional nineteenth-century works on racial science (for instance, those by Samuel G. Morton and Josiah C. Nott) to argue that they were not the last word on science in the southern United States—at least not for many contemporary intellectuals, including Benjamin Baneker, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and Sarah Mapps Douglass, whose watercolor work beautifully depicts the notion of fugitive science on the book's cover.

The book's five chapters detail different forms of the fugitive science notion, which the author uses as a heuristic tool to examine the rich and diverse printed materials of the time (for example, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, lectures, science, and literary books). One such material, which is examined in chapter 4, is *Blake or The Huts of America* (published serially in 1859, 1861-62) by African American physician Martin Delany, whose literary experiment is interpreted by Rusert not only as a speculative representation of fugitive science per se but also as a method employed in such experiments: that is, a somewhat diasporic form of science. This and several other cases are well articulated throughout the book, including Sarah Douglass's use of skulls as pedagogical aids and Frederick Douglass's mobilization of phrenology against craniology. These details are pivotal for Rusert, whose stated purpose is to demonstrate that the "history of fugitive science unsettles narratives that presume the unquestioned hegemony of racist science in the nineteenth century" (p. 219).

It would be interesting to see endeavors similar to Rusert's undertaken in such countries as

Brazil, which also has a dramatic history involving slavery. For instance, nineteenth-century Brazil was heavily influenced by an intellectual tradition drawn from European ideals of science and race. On the other hand, there is no historiographical novelty in the idea of African descendants using forms of social resistance and struggle for emancipation. This is a reality that has been well discussed and documented by many Brazilian historians and Brazilianists. However, Rusert's proposal is invigorating because it advocates a quest for forms of science conceptualized by African descendants during the nineteenth century. In other words, while traditional historiography in this period does not encourage us to look for literate and knowledgeable African descendants participating in the realm of modern Western science, the author uses archival research to reveal not only the scientific literacy of such actors but also their deeply exciting and creative ways of using medical and artistic ideas to subvert certain notions of race and social hierarchy.

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