
Joe Lockard, Associate Professor of English at Arizona State University and director of the Antislavery Literature Project, has produced in Watching Slavery, a slim, yet interesting analysis of several nineteenth-century “witnesses” of American slavery. This study includes chapters addressing: the travel accounts of William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens; “the fictions and travel narrative of British reform intellectual Harriet Martineau;” the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier; the judicial opinions of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story; and the writings of William Still, an African American from Philadelphia who was an active participant in the Underground Railroad (xxxii). Using various methodological practices common in literature studies and literary criticism, Lockard asserts that many or most accounts of antebellum slavery were “failed witnesses” because they were unsuccessful at ending slavery and the authors held the same racist attitudes present throughout nineteenth-century American society. Lockard concludes the introduction to Watching Slavery by writing that “the history of struggle against slavery emphasizes, the acts of writing and publishing witness accounts are only first steps in a long march toward achievement of justice and human rights” (xxxiii). Thus, his purpose is two fold: to provide a critical literary analysis of nineteenth-century antislavery writers and to demonstrate how even failed social protests contribute to improved human rights.

Instructors of literature will find Watching Slavery valuable as a way to expand the types of texts used in their courses. Those familiar with the methodologies of literary criticism such as the ahistorical practice of looking at documents in an effort to assess the formal/stylistic qualities outside of the cultural context of its production, or the somewhat presentist application of
modern ideas of class, gender, race on texts from other eras in an effort to determine their value for readers today may find *Watching Slavery* useful for their courses and their students. The chapter on Thackeray and Dickens provides an interesting and nuanced examination of a well-known writer, at least in the case of Dickens, and his “revulsions” of Southern slavery. Possibly the most successful section of *Watching Slavery* is the final chapter that examines William Still’s “Fugitive Encyclopedia.” Lockard adeptly critiques the stylistic qualities of this “fugitive travel encyclopedia” written to document experiences of those newly freed former slaves on the Underground Railroad (159). He argues that this “witness” account was possibly the most inspiring due to Still’s “active relationship between reportage and direct response” (xxxii–xxxiii). Lockard wants his writers directly engaged in social reform, the epitome of l’intellectuel engagé. As a work of literary criticism *Watching Slavery* is a successful contribution to the field.

However, readers of this journal may find that Professor Lockard’s approach does not correspond well with the practice of historical analysis or teaching students about American history in the nineteenth-century. The narratives accounts, antislavery poetry, and especially William Still’s fugitive encyclopedia are documents in which historians and students of history will find great value. Yet, the presentist judgments and academic jargon in *Watching Slavery* do little to help the reader understand nineteenth-century America on its own terms. Those unfamiliar with the methodology and language of “lit crit” will possibly find themselves lost much of the time. Historians of the antebellum period will note that Lockard fails to clearly define how the terms antislavery and abolition are used in *Watching Slavery* and that much of the time they are used interchangeably, which fails to take notice of historical realities. Additionally, at times his usage of the terms “witness” and “watching” does more to confuse rather than clarify his argument. Possibly the most problematic aspect of *Watching Slavery*
pertains to the persistent practice of conflating slavery and race. It should not come as a surprise that during the rise of scientific racism and an era when most people failed to challenge common social hierarchy that most Americans, including many abolitionists, were racist. This should not classify their actions as failed, nor should the fact that they were racist be ignored. However, their antislavery activity should be examined within its historical realities, as should the failed attempt at racial equality during Reconstruction. As history teachers well know, this period of American history is challenging enough for students to learn without confusing two of the most important issues to be addressed. Watching Slavery may be an asset in the literature classroom, yet readers of this journal might prefer to look elsewhere for materials on witness and travel accounts of antebellum slavery.

University of Houston

Ira Lee Berlet