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Lenora Warren. *Fire on the Water: Sailors, Slaves, and Insurrection in Early American Literature, 1789-1886.* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2019. 169 pp. $34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-68448-017-3.

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In this short and incisive book, Lenora Warren uses literary sources to observe the history of abolition not from the perspective of white activism, but from the point of view of black insurrection and resistance. She is interested in the figure of the "slave" not as a victim, the politically palatable and expedient portrayal, but as an agent of violence. More broadly, she tries to understand the long-standing effect that the abolitionist rhetoric of passivity has had in shaping racialized perceptions—in particular, fear and condemnation of "black" violence. This research could not be more relevant or timely.

Each of the four chapters of the book marries an analysis of a specific historical figure or context of insurrection and abolitionism to one or two literary texts produced by contemporaries. Chapter 1 discusses Olaudah Equiano's controversial *Interesting Narrative* (1789) and the abolitionist writings of the late eighteenth century, most notably Thomas Clarkson's collection of testimonies pertaining to the slave trade. Through these texts, it reconstructs the abolitionists' rhetoric of incorporating slave violence among the negative effects of the more generally violent slave trade, rather than casting it as a deliberate and rightful response to oppression. Chapter 2 tackles the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, discovered in Charleston in 1822, which some historians have argued was not real but the manifestation of white slaveholders' paranoia. Warren compares this event to an 1821 black pirate novella by a minor author, John Howison, which she uses as an example of how latent fears of slave revolt permeated Atlantic culture. Through the use of the "gothic" in some of Howison's other fictional representations of slave insurrection, "the flesh-and-blood slaves turn into specters who are silenced" (p. 65). Chapter 3 concerns the *Amistad* and *Creole* mutinies of 1839 and 1841, and their echoes in works by Martin Robison Delany and Frederick Douglass. Warren exposes how black violence was defused in these narratives by the omission of detail or by the assimilation of the free, heroic African rebels to the American founding fathers and to white models of Revolutionary honor. This necessarily made the legitimation of slave insurrection not universal but restricted to specific (idealized) cases. Finally, chapter 4 proposes an elaborate, albeit arguably hard to prove, connection between the case of Washington Goode, a black sailor sentenced to death by Herman Melville's father-in-law, and the novelist's white character Billy Budd. Partly because of the historical obscurity of Goode's trial, this chapter is the most decidedly literary of the four, with a strong focus on themes internal to Melville's opus.

In the coda to the book, Warren draws some apt and intriguing parallels between the rhetoric of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionists and that of the present-day Black Lives Matter movement, at least as it was when *Fire on the Water* went to press: both campaigns favored the language of victimhood and passivity, which is intrinsically problematic. More implicitly, this reminds us of how racialized fears of black violence from the slavery era, construing it as qualitatively different from white violence, still cast a shadow on the way US society stigmatizes, polices, and sentences black individuals.

On the whole, this book reads as an elegant and extremely subtle literary analysis of the relationship between enslaved agency, abolitionism, and violence by and against black people on the sea. At times, arguably, this subtleness leaves a bit too much implicit, even when it is clear that the author is familiar with the scholarship. For example, there are several themes and historiographies which this study could have explored further to flesh out its argument: the literature on colonial constructions of obeah and vodou; the debate on the moral, psychological, and economic roots of abolitionism; the changing and increasingly essentialized conceptions of "race" in this period, and especially the relationship between racism, climatic determinism, and ideas of violence and "barbarism"; the political debates, fears, and strategies connected to the military recruitment of black enslaved or liberated men; and the more general attitudes towards violence raised by the specter of radicalism in the Revolutionary era.

Many of these topics, it must be said, are briefly referenced throughout the volume: for instance, there is a hint to theories of climate and race on pp. 57-58, even though a broader discussion could have better placed Howison's views on the matter among those of his contemporaries. It is also true that as a reviewer I certainly come to this material with the strong bias of being a historian rather than a literary scholar, and as such used to treating fictional and literary texts as one source among many. This being said, there is one area specifically in which it would be interesting to see a more extensive dialogue between literary criticism and historical scholarship.

The themes of the seaman, seafaring, and freedom are explicit running threads, and central to this book's argument (p. 6). However, in discussing black sailors' peculiarity of "occupying states of freedom and un-freedom simultaneously" (p. 8), and the agency that could be derived from "mastery over the sea" (pp. 40, 90-91, 94-95), this study actually places itself on very well-trodden historiographical terrain. Most useful would have been, here, the work of Kevin Dawson on the power and agency of enslaved Atlantic pilots, as well as his most recent *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (2018). Nathan Perl-Rosenthal's *Citizen Sailors: Becoming American in the Age of Revolution* (2015) also has much to say about the early role of the sailing profession in the development of alternative, ethnically inclusive models of American citizenship. Research by Charles R. Foy and W. Jeffrey Bolster is mentioned, but it was surprising not to see references to the work of Isaac Land and Nicholas Rogers, among others, on the status of eighteenth-century black seamen vis-à-vis white colleagues.[1] Warren convincingly argues that the rhetorical association between oppressed enslaved laborers and exploited, flogged, and impressed sailors would inevitably play in favor of the white seaman, "treated as a slave," rather than serving the purpose of emancipation, and obscure some fundamental differences between the two categories, as well as the political agency behind black rebellion (pp. 25-27, 32-36, 104, 113-19). Yet the role of both free and enslaved black sailors in all this is the subject of major historical controversy. Marcus Rediker's work is repeatedly cited here, and somewhat criticized (pp. 7, 55, 104), but if *Fire on the Water* had taken into account (in addition to Bolster) historians who have explicitly disagreed with Rediker's stance, it could have partaken more directly in the

debate between those who see the Revolutionary seafaring Atlantic as a primarily class-riven world and those who see it as a primarily racialized one. This would have helped to highlight the distinctiveness of fears of black revolt, by comparison with the broader moral panic towards working-class radicalism. In turn, the historical debate itself could benefit from an expert reading of literary themes like Warren's, and from her healthy and intellectually sensitive reminders of how easy it is for us to "whitewash" even the history of black resistance.

Overall, in any case, this is an enjoyable, thought-provoking, and very rich book, which succeeds in the remarkable feat of adding an original voice to the study of several already well-rehearsed topics. Aimed primarily at literary scholars, it can also be of value for cultural and intellectual historians.

Note

[1]. Isaac Land, "Customs of the Sea Flogging, Empire, and the 'True British Seaman,' 1770 to 1870," *Interventions* 3, no. 2 (2001): 169-85, *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and Its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London: Continuum, 2007), esp. chapter 4.