

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity*. Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xxii + 484 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3296-7.



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This Violent Dilemma

The great paradox at the heart of the early American republic—or the “U.S. dilemma” as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Mary Frances Berry Collegiate Professor Emeritus of the University of Michigan, terms it—links the nation’s revolutionary and egalitarian ideals with its inegalitarian social structure and imperialist behavior. For more than a century historians have sought answers to this conundrum: how is it that a nation born of Enlightenment liberal and republican ideals could reconcile itself with racial slavery, the annihilation of Native Americans, the subjugation of women, and the marginalization of the propertyless rural poor? Perhaps the most powerful attempt to reconcile these competing ideals and realities comes from Edmund Morgan, whose *American Slavery, American Freedom* argued in 1975 that the development of white racial discourses—especially after the failed Bacon’s Rebellions of 1676—united Virginia whites by class against an increasingly black and enslaved laboring class. When Virginian Thomas Jefferson declared in 1776 that all men were created equal the white wealthy and middling classes knew who were to be included

among the “men” and who were not.

As Smith-Rosenberg notes, the process of revolutionary self-examination was also quite explicit among the powerful merchant class in northern cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. But as in colonial Virginia, northern merchants discovered to their dismay that those outside the republican realm were unwilling to stay silently on the margins. The discourses employed by early-republic merchant elites to “otherize” those against whom the new nation would proclaim its greatness in the community of imperial powers were inherently unstable. Indeed, the failure to bifurcate the republic into the “equal” republicans and the Other was more than political or ideological: it was cultural, too. This insight is the essential genius of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s book, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity*, published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press.

Drawing from a generation of scholarship in the

fields of gender, culture, and literary history, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg persuasively argues that every attempt to marginalize those outside the new republican elite ended up only destabilizing the elite itself. The public print culture of the urban merchant class portrayed women, the rural poor, and nonwhites as a dangerous-yet tantalizing-Other who provided an ever-changing tableaux of images on which to project the elite's imagined new empire. "Dread and desire, the need to exclude and the inability to exclude, lie at the heart of our national identity" (p. xi). Smith-Rosenberg deliberately restricts her analysis to the urban print culture popular among the merchant elite in northern cities in the decades after the American Revolution. This print culture included a host of novels written by men and women, as well as male-dominated magazines like Matthew Carey's *American Museum*, Noah Webster's *American Magazine*, and Isaiah Thomas's *Massachusetts Magazine*. Editors of these publications played a leading role in advocating for the new federal Constitution and helped generate and solidify patriotic support for the new republic among the growing merchant class.

To do so, the print culture assessed a variety of dramas unfolding on the western frontier, in the Caribbean, and within the dance halls of urban America. In each case, a sturdy commercial republican class faced a highly gendered and racialized Other that threatened to undermine the new nation. As Smith-Rosenberg argues, the commercial republican elite cared deeply about what Europe's aristocracy thought of this strange new republic born in the New World. In one of the most evocative sections of the book, she deconstructs a ball held in Philadelphia in honor of visiting French nobles like General Rochambeau. Her analysis of Benjamin Rush's epistolary narrative of the ball reveals a country elite remarkably nervous about its own standing in the eyes of Europe, desperate to be accepted as a power among empires, but also driven by an internal republican insistence that America's frontier life made the nation "more manly" than Old Europe. Yet, it is here, as elsewhere described in the book, that the merchant elite ultimately failed to balance its claims to masculine ownership of the new nation with the reality of multi-ethnic life on the edge of Western civilization. After all, the marker of a true European gentleman was his gracefulness and effortless performance of the rituals of rule. Nowhere did Rush or Smith-Rosenberg betray anything like the elan of the British gentry.

The fictional representation of Indian life—whether of the "noble savage" facing extinction or in increas-

ingly racist captivity narratives—also revealed a deep insecurity facing the founding generation of republicans. Whereas the "noble savage" Logan delivers a heartfelt plea for his people's valiant and "brave" civilization, Mary Rowlandson dramatizes her desperate fight for survival against the unambiguously wicked and barbaric Indians in western Massachusetts during King Philip's War. Not only do these two narratives contradict one another—is the still menacing Indian to be pitied or feared?—but even within the narratives, the message is unclear. After all, white men had failed to protect Rowlandson along the frontier (often running away), suggesting that the new nation had not exactly squared off against its foe with untrammelled bravery. Only divine guidance and, shockingly to this culture, female fearlessness saved these declining Puritans of the late seventeenth century from utter extinction, so Rowlandson (and Increase Mather) insisted.

The instability is evident in portrayals of race, slavery, and the Haitian revolution as well. As Matthew Carey whipped up anger against Philadelphia's black population for allegedly exploiting the city's infirm suffering from the horrid yellow fever epidemic of 1793, pioneering black Methodists like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones took to the public press to defend the honor and behavior of the black community during the crisis. And in a popular fictionalized account of the Haitian revolution, Leonora Sansay wrote *Zelica, the Creole* (1820) as a diatribe against slavery and the commercial excesses of rum importers. Indeed, white female authors employed their own narrative voices to subvert the male-dominated commercial republican discourse of the day. In both the magazine and fiction press, women played the dual role of temptress and destroyer of republican morality on one hand, and marker of commercial status on the other. Republican men expressed deep ambivalence about the consuming role (literal and figurative) their wives played in driving the new nation's economy. Female authors regularly turned this criticism back upon men who knew little of their own desires, not to mention those of their wives.

This Violent Empire is a bold book. It offers thought-provoking and exciting interpretations throughout. At times, however, the book is less convincing, especially when accounting for perceptions of rural farmers rising up on the western Massachusetts frontier. Smith-Rosenberg stretches metaphor a bit in this section, going so far as to describe Bostonian accounts of Shay's Rebellion as effeminizing, with the strongest evidence given by "A Cobler" writing in to Isaiah Thomas's *Worcester Magazine*. The charge in this case was that western farm-

ersâ plight was of their own making; by wearing expensive velvet clothes and dressing the dandy, the western farmer had lost his masculinity in the process. This analysis seems a bit overwrought. The core of the Bostonian argument against Shayâs Rebellion was that it represented a class of irresponsible men unwilling to pay their debts. That was plenty ammunition in a society controlled—however uncertainly—by urban merchant republicans.

But given that this is a work of cultural history, one should not expect to agree with every textual interpretation contained within. In fact, Smith-Rosenberg poses many of these analyses as a sort of rhetorical question, wondering if the discourse of republicanism really can be deconstructed and destabilized as she suggests. And that, I would argue, is what makes this book so com-

elling. It is a large-scale reframing of the American nation-building project. This is hardly the first gendered analysis of the early republic, or the first attempt to deconstruct post-revolutionary discourses to unveil the ambitions and fears of the nationâs first generation. *This Violent Empire* goes much further than that: it lays bear the entire discursive project of differentiating the new nationâs elite from its external neighbors and internal Others. While the book successfully proffers new lines of argumentation, the actual nation-building process Smith-Rosenberg uncovers was only partially successful. What made the new empire âviolentâ was the repeated failure of elites to control the external and internal contours of the republic. And as Smith-Rosenberg argues in the end, the often violent and always surprising process of making and unmaking national identity has continued to this day.

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