Lenora Warren, *Fire on the Water: Sailors, Slaves, and Insurrection in Early American Literature, 1789-1886* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2019), 169 pp.

Reviewed by **Jason M. Payton**, University of Georgia

Fire on the Water offers a necessary reckoning with the persistent failure of the abolitionist imagination to conceive of slave insurrection as an expression of political agency and not simply as a reaction to the brutalities of the slave trade and of slave society. Warren traces the systematic occlusion of the radical politics of insurrection within the abolitionist archive through chapters focused on the lives and works of four black sailors: Olaudah Equiano, Denmark Vesey, Joseph Cinqué, and Washington Goode. These figures make visible "the role of slave violence in general, and shipboard insurrection specifically, in shaping abolitionist discourse" (3). Each chapter traces the history of disavowal wherein abolitionist writers chose the image of the slave-as-victim over the insurrectionist as the preferred rhetorical tool for fashioning a critique of slavery.

Warren's opening chapter asks "how insurrection got written out of the early abolitionist narrative" and shows how this process of occlusion eradicates "early traces of black revolutionary activity," thereby "shielding abolitionists from the more radical dimensions of their opposition to the slave trade" (12). The works of Thomas Clarkson illustrate this process. Clarkson collected a number of sailor testimonies in preparation for his *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-trade* (1778). These testimonies revealed a high incidence of insurrection during slaving voyages, leaving Clarkson with the rhetorical conundrum of how best to narrate insurrection. His choice to frame insurrectionist violence as reactionary rather than as a primary claim to the right of liberty effaces black political agency in favor a paternalist narrative of black victimhood that emphasized the need for amelioration rather than revolution (28). Clarkson's use of the "Plan and Sections of a Slave Ship" in subsequent writings becomes emblematic of this narrative of victimhood and sets the tone for the abolitionist message about the relationship between slavery and violence for decades to come (31).

Warren notes a similar disavowal of the revolutionary potential of insurrectionist violence in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. She argues that Equiano's emphasis on his identity as a sailor places him in a complex, problematic relation to the slave experience. When narrated from his position as a sailor, the evils of slavery witnessed by Equiano risk "erasing the distinction between the two" and eliding sympathy for slaves into sympathy for sailors who suffer "like slaves" (34). The conflation of these identities causes Equiano to miss opportunities to focus exclusively on the radical potential of insurrection at multiple points in his narrative. One such point occurs when Equiano is

forced to fight a white boy aboard the *Namur* for the entertainment of the crew. This scene, which occurs while Equiano is a freeman and which is central to his incorporation into naval culture, "acknowledges even as it controls shipboard insurrection" by pantomiming the history of insurrection revealed by Clarkson's surveys (11).

Another such point occurs when Equiano defies the captain's orders to nail down the hatches of a slave ship en route to Georgia as the ship is about to wreck. Equiano's solidarity with the slaves in the hold at this moment is brimming with insurrectionist potential, but his decision to focus the dénouement of this scene on his own heroic intervention to help prevent a shipwreck signals his refusal to "unpack the full political implications" of this moment for the reader (39). We feel the force of Equiano's rhetorical choices here as Warren reminds us that he would have had both Tacky's Rebellion on Jamaica and the St. Patrick's Day revolt on Montserrat in mind when writing (36).

Clarkson and Equiano were "instrumental in creating a discourse that disavowed insurrection as a viable means of emancipation" (41). This discourse repeats itself elsewhere in the abolitionist archive, including the writings of Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany. Warren reads Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" (1852) and Delany's *Blake* (1861) in the context of the vexed public responses to the *Amistad* rebellion of 1839 and the *Creole* mutiny of 1841. While abolitionists saw Joseph Cinqué and his fellow insurrectionists as heirs of the American Revolution, the courts denied US slaves the right to use violence to pursue the natural right of freedom (72). Warren reads "The Heroic Slave" and *Blake* as similarly vexed in their response to the question about slaves' right to revolt. Neither shows its protagonist in the "heat of battle," as Warren puts it, which would legitimize insurrection (75). Instead, Douglass avoids direct representation of insurrection via a second-hand narration of the *Creole* mutiny and emphasizes environmental rather than human agency during the mutiny, while Delany defers Blake's revolutionary moment indefinitely. For Douglass and Delany, it was "more important to facilitate the adoption of a more radical approach to abolition than it was to think concretely about the possibilities of a Haitian-style revolution." The failure of these authors to think in such concrete terms constitutes for Warren "not merely the failure of imagination but also the failure of revolutionary rhetoric to exceed its limits," which would entail facing "the possibility of slaves overthrowing the nation." Douglass and Delany fall short by displacing the scene of insurrection from the "mainland to the safe desolation of the ocean" (97).

Warren is unflinching in her critique of such imaginative failures. The clarity and force of her moral vision constitutes the greatest strength of *Fire on the Water* in my view. By

bringing the reader into the intimate literary spaces wherein the radical politics of insurrection are denied in favor of the more conservative politics of moral suasion, Warren brings the reader into an ethical relation to the archive. Her study invites meditation on both the historical occlusion of black agency and revolutionary potential, as well as on the continued failure to imagine black violence as anything other than reactionary. *Fire on the Water* suggests that the historical process of erasure traced in each chapter is still operative in our present moment and beckons us to consider how narratives of black victimhood in the face of state violence continues to obscure the more fundamental claim black Americans have on the "positive freedom of rights" (131). Moreover, this study reminds readers that antiracist work in the present need not be condemned to repeat the failures of the past. If eighteenth-century abolitionists' decision not to decry the sugar trade "wholesale" effectively decoupled "antiracism from anticapitalism," Warren reminds readers today that the "true threat of insurrectionist and revolutionary violence is to the economic power centers and the suppression of such movements has as much to do with the preservation of that power as it does to the preservation of human life" (132).

Readers will find *Fire on the Water* an important contribution to the study of slavery and abolitionism. The book stands in genealogical relation to works like C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* in its focus on the revolutionary potential of insurrection and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* in its focus on silencing insurrectionists within the abolitionist archive. Its engagement with the history of insurrection—even in the form of disavowal—offers a salutary provocation to think before and beyond subjection as a heuristic for the study of racial formation established by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection*. Moreover, this book also makes major contributions to Black Atlantic studies and to maritime and oceanic studies at large. Warren's emphasis on black sailors expands on Hester Blum's insights about the centrality of the sailor to oceanic studies in *The View from the Masthead*. Its confrontation with abolitionists' unwillingness to legitimize insurrection resists the optimism about the transferability of revolutionary sentiment from sea to land in evidence in Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh's *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

Scholars working in these fields will find Warren's book essential reading. They will also find the book's clarity and concision impressive. *Fire on the Water* will teach well in both the undergraduate and graduate classrooms. The book leaves me with one enduring question, which I believe will also transform the research and teaching agendas of those who read it: What happens to the literary histories of slavery and abolitionism, of the Black Atlantic and of maritime and oceanic studies if we replace Whittier's image of the kneeling supplicant slave with the image of the raised arm of the insurrectionist as their emblem?