

Smith-Rosenburg, Carroll, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity*

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Carroll Smith-Rosenburg's *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* is a new approach to looking at and understanding how the Founding Fathers in the early years of the American Republic recognised the need for and created a brand new identity for the American people. Smith-Rosenburg has expressed this situation as the Founding Fathers "seeking to constitute a sense of national collectivity for the motely array of European settlers" who resided on America's eastern seaboard. In fact, the "new nation's founding generation not only had to create a mythic heritage of bravery and love of liberty" they were also required "to imagine" Americans as being "arrayed against an expanding series of threatening Others" (p. x).

So who exactly were those people deemed to be Americans and who were these so called *Others* who played a vital role in the nation's consciousness about their own national identity? These are questions which Smith-Rosenburg manages to address and explain throughout her book. Strictly speaking an American was someone who was a white skinned European-American, Protestant Christian, who owned a specific value of property, and was enlightened enough to appreciate Republican freedoms and exercise their associated liberties. Building upon this theme, the author reveals how important it was for Americans to recognise and identify the characteristics and behaviours of *Others*. It was the abhorred different traits of *Others*, which Americans could denounce as 'un-American'. In fact, by distancing themselves from the *Others'* features, Americans would be able to show that they were civilised and cultured, while the *Others* were savage and unfit for the benefits of American Republicanism.

This sense of a national identity was just as much about those who belonged as it was about those people who were denied access or excluded. Most notably those excluded were African-Americans and Native-Americans, but also denied the full benefits of liberty were European-American women and those white people too poor to own sufficient property. All of these groups were deemed not civilized enough for citizenship or worthy enough to be considered as belonging to the American identity. While trying to understand the dynamic of who belonged and those who did not qualify to be an American was complex, what was certain was that people living in the United States in the 1780s and '90s would fight to defend their position within this identity, while those denied would fight for their inclusion. Typically, this resulted in violent action between the competing peoples in the forms of rioting, lynching, duelling, and physical harm and public humiliation such as tar and feathering.

The author's expressed purpose for *This Violent Empire* is to explore the complexity from which an American national identity first emerged. Smith-Rosenburg's investigation delves into "the uncertainties, contradictions and insecurities that characterize" this national identity (p. xi). The author's exploration into this new identity is made unique by the use of 1780s and '90s American newspapers, magazines, and literature such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntley*, Susanna Rowson's *Reuben and Rachel*, and Leonora Sansay's *Zalica*. It is through these mechanisms rather than relying solely upon the political discourse of prominent Founding Fathers such as George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, that has enabled Smith-Rosenburg to reveal how the concept of what it meant to be an American was able to have a far wider reach into the homes, work and lives of the new citizens. In many ways, it was the new United States' popular culture, much like the modern day internet and visual interactive advertising, which disseminated to the population, those acceptable characteristics needed and evidently displayed in order to belong within the national identity.

One major area which this book does not explore deeply enough is the issue of violence. While it is hinted at, violence as a means to achieve a place with American identity takes a back seat to understanding just what constituted that identity. The

reasons and rationales for why people used violent methods are brushed over. Another short coming within Smith-Rosenburg's study is that the author assumes that the reader possesses a well-groomed knowledge of political ideals both from the pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment eras, specifically, political thinkers such as Thomas Hobbs and John Locke. Within this political comprehension, the author also assumes that the reader has a thorough understanding about the differences between republicanism and liberalism as well as knowing about the complexities within each of these political models. When considering the need for a pre-existing knowledge of these issues, this study may not be the best place to start for someone relatively new to this period of history. Overall, Carroll Smith-Rosenburg's *This Violent Empire* does make an interesting contribution to the existing historical scholarship for both the War of Independence and foundation of the American Republic.

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