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## — Preface —

Recently, tales of sea adventures have surfaced in various arenas of American popular culture. Building on the blockbuster success of the 1997 movie *Titanic*, television and film industries have produced shows and movies that often derive their central drama from a disaster at sea, whether it is the result of a whale's wrath (NBC's adaptation of the literary scholar Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea*, 2001), a plane crash (Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, 2000), or destructive weather (*The Perfect Storm*, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Best-selling nonfiction such as Erik Larson's *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (1999) likewise reflects the reading public's interest in historical stories of survival at sea.<sup>2</sup> These contemporary manifestations of sea adventures are, I believe, rooted both in Americans' interest in their nation's history and in an anxiety over an inability to survive in the absence of technology.

In simple terms, we are drawn to survival stories set at sea because they expose "the naked truth" about ourselves and an American ethic of survival. This ethic is imagined to have been derived from the survival experiences of early Americans, and it is one we hope to share in as an audience. Early American immigrants are portrayed as having survived the unforgiving ocean and uncivilized wilderness while propagating an ethic of family and loyalty, and a self-reliance rooted in the hope for a better society. Likewise, many African American narratives, such as the print and film version of the story of the *Amistad*, Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* work to interpret traumatic sea crossings and their influence on

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an ethic of survival among the historical and contemporary lives of African Americans.

Initially, I began this project exploring the historical foundation of Americans' interest in sea narratives. I found that contemporary critiques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sea stories and maritime culture commonly represent the sea as a frontier of masculinity. Traditionally, the sea has been read as the boundary between boyhood and manhood, ignorance and discovery. The 1967 assumption of W. H. Auden that the sea is a "state of barbaric vagueness . . . unless saved by the effort of gods and men" (6) remains rooted in later critics' assumptions as well.<sup>3</sup> Understandably, the narratives that result from "mastery" of the sea have traditionally been assumed to be by or about men exclusively.

And yet, during my research, I have been struck by the persistent presence of women and the feminine on the watery terrain seemingly reserved for men and masculinity. Historically, women, in form and in flesh, have been going to sea as ship figureheads; women have authored letters from aboard ship and accompanied their husbands who captained their floating homes; and women have played fictional roles as slaves, sweethearts, wives, mothers, and daughters. Women at sea contributed to the formation of an ethics of survival that helped to define American ideals. The exclusion of women from the sea and sea narratives is a twentieth-century construction.

This book focuses on American sea narratives that are very seldom explored, yet their one-time popularity and accessibility indicate the early American public's interest in defining itself as an exceptional community. As I uncovered images of women at sea in antebellum narratives ranging from novels, to sermons, to newspaper accounts and lithographs, it became clear to me how women and the sea narratives they occupied contributed to the construction of a national rhetoric of exceptionalism at a crucial time in American history. The argument of this book is that Anglo-American women who appear in antebellum sea narratives are often portrayed as models of American ideals derived from women's seemingly innate Christian self-sacrifice. These ideals, in conjunction with the

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maritime directive (originating in the first half of the nineteenth century) that one should attend to women and children first during sea disasters, in turn defined a new masculine individualism, one that was morally minded, rooted in Christian principles, and dedicated to preserving virtue. The early American nation used the “women and children first” maxim not only as a lifesaving procedure but as a principle to which its men would be held. The exceptional nature of America, a nation chosen by God, depended on this ideal.

My work develops a line of inquiry sparked by a number of Americanists who trace the interstices of the private and the public, race and gender, and the created definitions of self, family, and nation. In particular, I follow the lead of Dana D. Nelson, who has examined how nineteenth-century hierarchies of power influenced gender and race perceptions that coalesced into a national identity.<sup>4</sup> While contemporary literary critics currently analyze one or the other theme in relation to particular novels or cultural trends, this study shows how all of these thematic building blocks to national identity coalesce in representations of women at sea. All but one of the chapters explore a type of female character in sea narratives who reveals national anxieties about God’s influence on America’s progress, the moral risks inherent in masculine individualism, Anglo-American notions of racial difference, the moral implications of slavery, and male and female gender roles. Thereby I make the case that women in sea narratives serve as a new resource for critics’ ongoing discussions of how representations of women contributed to national identity in early America.

The link between sea narratives and national identity has been explored by other American literary critics who see the maritime novels and stories of James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allen Poe as historically situated critiques of American ideals.<sup>5</sup> Critics of sea literature typically assume that while the sea has helped to define America, it has always been a space for predominantly male activities such as exploration, wars, whaling, and sailing. With the exception of the work of the historians Margaret Creighton, Lisa Norling, and Joan Druett, little attention has been

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paid to women's influence on sea narratives and the national ideals informed by such narratives. In 1973 *National Geographic* inaugurated a series called *Men, Ships, and the Sea*: with few exceptions, the associations implied in the title have held true.

Historians and literary critics are beginning to reread American maritime history and recover women's contributions. Norling examines how women's handiwork, clothing, food, letters, and self-sufficiency at home fostered the growth of the shipping and fishing industry in the nineteenth century. Creighton has focused on how the culture of sailors and officers was influenced by their perceptions of women. Druett uncovers forgotten historical examples of women at sea and reviews their sailing experiences as wives, mothers, and daughters. Haskell Springer interprets the rarely published private letters and correspondence between women and men at sea.<sup>6</sup> It is apparent that women are increasingly seen by scholars as participants in and contributors to American maritime culture and history. Unlike the subjects of these historians, the women in my study are not necessarily real women who go to sea. Instead, I am interested in the image of women at sea. How did publishers, engravers, newspaper reporters, and male and female authors represent women at sea, and what do those representations say about the hopes, desires, anxieties, and goals of the United States at a volatile time in the nation's history?

The antebellum era, which in this study refers to the several decades before the Civil War, was a time when the explosion of print culture, pride in the sea, westward expansion, and unstable gender roles converged to create images that sketched the contours of the nation's moral nature. It was an immensely fertile and volatile age. The United States grappled with the memories of two wars with England during which many of its own citizens had been disloyal to the new nation. Additionally, within a span of a few decades, the states and territories experienced Indian removal, religious awakening, increased abolitionist agitation, an industrial revolution, economic instability, increased immigration, and railroad expansion. The impact of a perceived "manifest destiny" even brought a war with Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Necessarily, the young nation's commitment

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to, and understanding of, a consistent set of ideals was tenuous at best.

Responding to the fluidity of social change, the nation's literary output, in the form of novels, newspaper accounts, sermons, and broadsides, often carried messages that reinforced certain notions of American exceptionalism.<sup>8</sup> American exceptionalism, as recently defined by Wai-chee Dimock, is the antebellum version of the Puritans' belief in America as the new Jerusalem. According to Dimock, after the Revolutionary War, faith in supposedly American institutions like "truth and justice" contributed to Americans' notion that they composed an exceptional nation (13).<sup>9</sup> Presuming to have been chosen by God as torchbearers of civilization, Anglo-America saw commitment to truth and justice as an obligation to God, family, and the nation.<sup>10</sup> This belief surfaced in the pages and images of sea narratives, populated by men and women whose natures were tested by the sea, by God, and by one another. The test was all the more consequential when women were on board. The recognition, or lack thereof, of the individual's obligation to God, family, and the nation sent messages to readers that either challenged or affirmed America's exceptional nature. Whether they were passengers, female slaves, Englishwomen portrayed by American publishers, or cross-dressed mariners, the antebellum women and men examined in this study expose national anxieties about the fragility of America's definition of itself as exceptional.

National dramas were staged on land. But as the following chapters demonstrate, America's oceanic frontier consistently served as center stage for the dramatization of American character, particularly when women were involved in the story. Though landscapes shaped the stories of early Americans, the presence of the sea in their lives was profoundly influential as well. In the early nineteenth century, when the United States began building a navy, packet ships became regular mail carriers, and whalers prospered, the sea proved to be integral to the young nation's multiple identities. As the path for the slave's Middle Passage or route of escape, or the freed black sailor's source of subsistence, or the immigrant's desired site for transition from old world to "new," the sea maintained a presence

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in the lives of many Americans. The War of 1812, America's second war of independence, was essentially instigated by the American desire for freedom at sea. In particular, as illustrated by President Madison's list of reasons for the War of 1812, many Americans recognized the sea as central to the nation's identity.<sup>11</sup>

By the start of the nineteenth century, serious construction of a U.S. navy began as a response to North African rulers who demanded exorbitant tributes in exchange for freedom at sea.<sup>12</sup> These wars with "Barbary," as most North African countries were labeled, were later celebrated in patriotic songs, including "The Marine's Hymn." Preceding the Civil War, American ships "carried close to seventy-five percent of the country's foreign trade" (Springer, Introduction 13), enabling Americans to see themselves as a nation whose principles of life and liberty touched shores all over the world. As such, the sea is not only a source of pride and American economic and military power in the early nineteenth century but also the stage where the American character was enacted in national dramas. The draw of the sea and its potential to help define, develop, and reflect a desirable national identity was so strong that fictional and real imperiled women were yanked from the domestic setting of the parlor and tossed aboard a ship to become characters destined to test the nation's own self-image.



Representations of women at sea served as a repository for Anglo-American anxieties about exceptionalism and the desire to fulfill both its promise of individual liberty and its special covenant with God. The chapters that follow examine how images of women at sea attended to the nation's crisis of identity. In the first chapter, I trace American foundations of the sea narrative; the "sea-deliverance" stories from which later nineteenth-century shipwreck narratives evolved. The chapter outlines sea narratives from Columbus's claim that he threw his account of discovery overboard in a barrel when imperiled by the ocean, to William Bradford's written version of

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the Pilgrims' *Mayflower* landing. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans often heard or read sermons or accounts of the English immigrant's struggles at sea. The first nine chapters of the well-known *Remarkable Providences* by Increase Mather tell stories of struggle and survival during the crossing to America and how such "remarkable sea-deliverances," as Mather termed them, earned many immigrants a rite of passage as a Christian and "New World" citizen.

This chapter builds on Donald P. Wharton's reading of sea-deliverance narratives from 1610 to 1766.<sup>13</sup> Wharton argues that shipwreck tales pointed to the hand of "Providence" as the source of salvation and served as proof that the Puritans were "a people especially called to a historic mission" (8). Wharton suggests that for Puritan Americans, such narratives confirmed God's hand in their destiny. With Wharton as a point of departure, I consider how early Americans shifted from seeing solely the hand of Providence at work in their lives to more rationalistic interpretations. By the end of the eighteenth century, rationalism and optimism in human potential took root, producing a new focus for sea narratives—the value of human effort. While Providence never disappears from shipwreck narratives, narratives such as Olaudah Equiano's autobiography illustrate how the individual's choices and efforts are instrumental in God's design. If Providence and human effort both contributed to survival at sea when disaster struck, then there was no especial grace to be bestowed on Americans. The final section of the chapter proposes that the key to the perpetuation of American exceptionalism was the growing presence of morally minded Anglo-American women within sea narratives, women who bridged the gap between Providence and human perseverance, the holy and the human.

Chapter 2 recovers forgotten narratives by and about antebellum female shipwreck victims. These stories, some fictional, some based on actual shipwrecks, come in a variety of forms, such as published eulogies, letters, popular anthologies of disaster stories, and even a fashion plate, and are central to the concept of American exceptionalism. Largely unexplored by literary critics and historians,

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these narratives demonstrate how images of men saving women at sea served as moral lessons, cautionary tales, and reminders of the nation's covenant with God and the necessity of controlling the self-interested passions so dangerous to a democracy.

It is no coincidence that the oft-repeated cry of "Women and children first!" became a culturally sanctioned maritime custom during the antebellum period. The relative success of crew and male passengers to ensure the safety of women and children became a gauge of a national moral character at a time when individualism threatened the ideal of a national community. In accounts of the wreck of the *Helen M'Gregor* (1830), the *Home* (1837), the *Pulaski* (1838), the *Ocean Monarch* (1849), and the *Central America* (1857), men who risked their own lives to save women during a crisis at sea were depicted as saving faith in God, loyalty to family, and commitment to community. As such, these accounts reveal that American men were not just rescuing women and children first but also securing America's exceptional nature. Anglo-American women facilitated the belief that Americans were uniquely moral beings, and American exceptionalism was exemplified by the reaction to this endangered, sanctified female at sea.

The inherent moral virtue of Anglo-American women also served abolitionists, who attempted to associate the suffering of slave women during the Middle Passage with suffering Anglo-American women. Middle Passage journeys, during which hundreds of thousands of Africans died of starvation or disease, are mostly undocumented, yet they are the most apparent sea narrative of the antebellum era. Nearly every institution functioning in the United States by 1861 was connected to the Middle Passage, which brought over the hands that both physically and psychically built the nation. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff says, the Middle Passage was essentially the "beginning of every 'slave narrative'" (emphasis in original, 27). In studies of African Americans and the sea, such as W. Jeffrey Bolster's *Black Jacks* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, however, black women and the sea have been overlooked. The few narratives about the Middle Passage experience that survive were written by African American men; none are explicitly recounted by African American women.

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In chapter 3, the Middle Passage is interpreted as a crucial trope for African American women whose writing helped shape an American moral character. First, I look at how some African American women writers transformed the cultural legacy of the Middle Passage into a source for self-determination. The first section of the chapter traces the trope of the Middle Passage in African American women's writing, particularly Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Nancy Prince's *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*. Though neither woman traveled the Middle Passage herself, it is recalled as a cultural touchstone in their narratives. For example, in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, the author escapes slavery and hides in a nine-foot-long, seven-foot-wide, and three-foot-high attic space. Jacobs watches her children grow up, from a distance, through a small hole in the wall of these tight quarters. Such positioning recalls the cramped berths of the slave ships, and the peephole provides a kind of symbolic, porthole perspective of loss as experienced by slave women during the Middle Passage. Yet images of the Middle Passage are subverted even as they surface. Jacobs labels her peephole a "loophole" and uses it to mastermind her own and her children's futures. African American women writers such as Jacobs interpreted the cruel realities of the Middle Passage as both a symbolic route of transfiguration and a source for persuasive rhetoric demonstrating the God-given morality of their desires and summoning the respect and liberty afforded Anglo-American women.

Secondly, I trace how the suffering of slave women and the Middle Passage were linked to the moral directive "women and children first" to become the core of abolitionist polemics. Abolitionists like Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe represent women and the Middle Passage as a spectacle of suffering, the epitome of the unnaturalness of slavery. These writers argue that perpetuating the Middle Passage legacy of physically abusing slave women and separating them from their children was a violation of white womanhood as well. Abolitionists attempted to convince men that they were violating the directive that women and children should have precedence by scolding sea captains and slaveholders for

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separating slave mothers and their children, and insisting that such suffering would never be tolerated in white women's lives. Abolitionists warned that white manhood would be threatened if the sanctity of enslaved women and children's humanity were not validated. In simple terms, abolitionist rhetoric posited that the mistreatment of black women was essentially an exercise in emasculation.

American abolitionists understood how the idea that women and children should come first could be used to rhetorically join the suffering of slave women and Anglo-American women. However, saving black women from suffering does not exclude the fact that Americans were anxious about maintaining the mystique of American exceptionalism and, by extension, superiority over, not just African Americans, but all nonwhites. Chapter 4 examines another group of shipwreck narratives that attempted to link ethnic rather than racial identity when Anglo-Americans perceived themselves as threatened by nonwhite populations. The preservation of national identity, which often took Anglo-American women as its emblem, unfolds in unexpected ways in several popular sea narratives in which Englishwomen are the victims. The fictional accounts of Maria Martin and Eliza Bradley were immensely popular. Their tales of shipwreck and captivity by North Africans appeared in over a dozen editions. The fictionalized female narrators are represented as British ladies, yet their narratives were issued exclusively by American publishers. Two other shipwreck tales, written by Eliza Fraser and Ann Saunders, feature captivity among Native Americans and cannibalistic passengers, respectively, and are purportedly nonfiction. The narratives were altered when republished in the United States; these alterations reflect national attitudes toward race and gender.

Transatlantic tales of women in crisis have been overlooked by critics.<sup>14</sup> However, these popular stories contribute to the construction of an American character as distinct from other, less exceptional or downright "godless" nations. Post-Revolutionary and early antebellum Anglo-Americans saw the plight of these Englishwomen as their own. Using Etienne Balibar's notion of "fictive ethnicity" to

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describe Anglo-Americans' seemingly "natural" ties to an English ethnicity, I illustrate how American audiences identified with English women like Eliza Bradley, Maria Martin, and Eliza Fraser, whose popular narratives define an Anglo-Christian ethnicity against the North African "Moors," with whom the United States was in constant conflict, or the natives of other lands, who are constructed to resemble the characterization of Native Americans in captivity narratives. The Anglo-American identification with English ethnicity made it possible for white Americans to project a hierarchy on those who didn't share Anglo-American cultural assumptions, namely, North Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans. The plight of British ladies at sea and in captivity demonstrated for Americans the dangers posed by nonwhites at home and abroad while emboldening a sense of Anglo-American exceptionalism. Additionally, the American publishers' alterations of Eliza Fraser's and Ann Saunders's narratives reflect the perceived desires and expectations of a race, gender, and class-conscious American public. Identifying the shipwrecked English woman's miseries assured Anglo-Americans that, though the umbilical cord to England had been cut, they could still believe their "natural" English ethnicity was superior to all others.

The question of American exceptionalism and anxiety over commitment to God, family, and the nation is raised in yet another type of female character: the cross-dressed female sailor. This character appears in popular fiction such as *The Female Marine* (1815), *Fanny Campbell, the Female Pirate Captain* (1844), and most of James Fenimore Cooper's sea fiction, including *The Pilot* (1824), *The Red Rover* (1827), *The Water-Witch* (1830), and *Jack Tier* (1848). In an era of the self-made man and expansionism, when the Constitution's promotion of individual liberty was put to the test, interactions with cross-dressed female characters indicated qualities in men worthy of loyalty or condemnation.

The women in these (likely) fictional stories dress as sailors or marines to earn a living, fight for their country, or pursue a lover or husband. Though the women are cross-dressed, their identity as loyal servants to God, family, and the nation shines through all

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disguises. These stories address anxieties over what lies beneath American men's clothing—selfless virtue or greed and self-advancement. Cross-dressed female mariners serve two purposes: they chart the best qualities of the American male, or they provide a warning to Anglo-American men in danger of dismantling American claims to exceptionalism. Looking like men and acting as a model of manhood, these female characters remind men of their nobler nature and obligation to God, family, and the nation.

Cross-dressing mariner narratives are one way of foregrounding the precariousness of a self-ascribed American exceptionalism. The woman in distress at sea challenged America: questions about American character lay in the response. What is the role of the individual in a community believed to be sanctioned by God? Does capitalist America's promotion of the self-made man dissuade men from sacrificing themselves for their families, communities, and God? Does black women's suffering emasculate white men? Is white America's ethnic identity and cultural superiority a fiction? And finally, do efforts at self-advancement affect the founding ideals of the nation? As the faces of Americans changed and men's loyalties became unstable in the face of the potential profits to be gained by expansionism, putting women and children first was not just an act of selflessness but a call for the citizenry to inhabit the cloak of virtue and honor its profound commitment to God, family, and the nation.