

she deserves praise. But, truth be told, there is much more to celebrate in her book, which will undoubtedly reshape the nature of the conversation on colonial Southeast Asia for many years to come, as historians take up her invitation to bring the documentary practices of mobile legal actors in conversation with the histories of Indian Ocean empires.

Fahad Ahmad Bishara
University of Virginia

Christopher Tomlins, *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 352. \$29.95 hardcover (ISBN 9780691198668).

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Nat Turner is best known for his role in a singular event. In the summer of 1831, Turner convinced a number of other enslaved people to wage war against the white slaveholders of Southampton County, Virginia. In a single day of fierce and explosive violence, Turner and his fellow rebels killed some fifty-five white men, women, and children. After a series of confrontations with white militias, Turner escaped and went into hiding for more than 2 months. When finally captured, Turner was incarcerated, tried, and executed on charges of conspiracy and insurrection.

Christopher Tomlins's *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* complicates the "event" of Nat Turner's uprising as a clear and defined historical moment. Instead, Tomlins challenges us to consider the creation of Nat Turner in life, death, and memory as a historical phenomenon through which to explore larger questions about evidence, discovery, and conjecture. For nearly two centuries, Turner's story has been the subject of much projection and speculation. Writers, artists, and scholars have cast him as an unhinged lunatic, a freedom fighter, a brilliant misanthrope, and a messianic warrior. Because only fragments of evidence survive, he often emerges as the creation of contemporary imaginations more than as a product of the past. Turner's role in a violent attack against slavery has made him a particularly seductive flashpoint for such creative license, drawing him into the present when scholars grapple with questions of racial justice, violent protest, and organized resistance in our modern age.

In the Matter of Nat Turner explores these tensions between history and the present, between archival research and speculation, and between what is documented and knowable and that which is fragmentary and elusive. Tomlins

explains how Turner is often “yanked into the American present to teach it a lesson it could understand on its own terms” (22). Without rejecting the impulse to animate the past with the present, Tomlins grapples intentionally and purposefully with questions about how the discipline of history and the tools of archival research can help reconcile “the fold of time” that enlivens a historical subject “in constellation with the present” (23).

Tomlins begins with a critique of William Styron’s 1967 novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, taking particular aim at its uses and misuses of history. In an effort to present a version of Turner that twentieth-century audiences could understand, Styron took enormous license with his character. When confronted by the archival Turner, Styron found he did not like the “ruthless and perhaps psychotic fanatic, [particularly] a religious fanatic” who emerged from the historical records (7). Similarly, he denied that any memory of Turner existed in African American folklore. Rejecting both the historical record and collective memory, Styron claimed that creative license was necessary in order to understand Turner. In his fictionalized interpretation, Styron created a self-serving Turner who spoke to the racial strife of the late twentieth century and pandered to the desires of white American readers who hungered for healing and reconciliation. In the debates that followed publication, Styron struggled to accept that his work was presentist but was unable to clearly articulate the relationship of *The Confessions* to history.

From Styron’s fictional Turner, Tomlins moves into a granular reading of the most authoritative text on the Southampton rebellion, the original version of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, published in 1831 by a struggling but opportunistic Virginia attorney named Thomas Ruffin Gray. Gray gained audience with Turner, who sat in jail awaiting execution. Gray recorded aspects of their conversation and hoped that a published version of Turner’s “confession” would sell enough copies to pull him out of debt. The pecuniary motivations behind Gray’s project are but one of the many problems that challenge *The Confessions* as a reliable source. In both focus and structure, *The Confessions* sought to assure white Virginians that Turner was a lone wolf, a “gloomy fanatic,” whose actions could be contained and neutralized by the logic and process of Virginia’s legal system (86). Gray’s pamphlet created the singularity of “Nat Turner’s Rebellion” and translated the violence in Southampton into an event that could be recognized by white Virginians for whom the language of “slave rebellion” represented a profound and legible threat.

Although there are myriad reasons to question Gray’s depictions of events, Tomlins argues that there are enough fragments of Turner’s own voice in the first half of *The Confessions* to reveal a counter-narrative that more closely reflects Turner’s own intentions. In the very first line of *The Confessions*, Gray reports that Turner said: “You have asked me to give a history of the motivations which induced me to undertake the late insurrection, as you call

it" (48). Turner, it seemed, did not consider his actions "insurrection." Rather, he followed his own logic, which propelled his spiritual mission of redemption and sacred justice. In his most compelling and fascinating analysis, Tomlins engages in a close reading of the scriptural references in *The Confessions* to reveal Turner's fluency in the New Testament and his particular engagement with Gospel of Luke. When pressed to explain why he did what he did, Tomlins argues, Turner refused to concede Gray's characterization of "revenge, or revolution, or self-expiation, or guilt," and remained true to his own "eschatological cosmology of revelation and judgement" (82).

From the sacred origins of Turner's purpose, Tomlins shifts to the profane legacies of the Southampton uprising. The events of 1831 shattered the foundation on which the "vulnerable, fragile sovereigns" of Virginia's slaveholding class staked their claims to social and economic power (131). After Turner unleashed violence against slaveholders, many white Virginians began to question whether the risks of sustaining a slave system were worth it. Those who advocated for emancipation spoke of the moral sins of slavery. Poor white working men critiqued the institution, claiming that slavery degraded their labor. Petitions to end slavery flooded the Virginia legislature. Despite such debate, however, slavery was not abolished in Virginia. Rather, the crisis of slave rebellion proved a catalyst for the birth of a new defense of slavery, one rooted in the language of political economy and bolstered by the rational logic of the market. The new generation of pro-slavery intellectuals argued that the problem of slavery could not be solved by politics. They argued that only the slow, deliberate, evolution of market forces could determine slavery's fate. In other words, the slave regime in Virginia did not change after Turner's rebellion. Rather, as Tomlins explains, "the regime changed its description of itself" (133).

In the Matter of Nat Turner is by no means an exhaustive history of the Southampton rebellion. Despite his capacious analysis of Turner's spiritual self and the triumph of political economy in Virginia, Tomlins says little about the communities in which Turner lived, the networks shared by enslaved people, and the connections between the Southampton uprising and broader histories of slave resistance. As such, there remains much room for speculation in the matter of Nat Turner. What Tomlins has provided, however, is an expansive and fearless model for such speculation. *In the Matter of Nat Turner* provides a master class in what it means to explore the unwritten, to engage with the fragmentary, and to expand the potentialities of historical research.

Honor Sachs

University of Colorado Boulder