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“On My Head I Placed a Crown of Most Exquisite Make”

Shipwreck, Maroonage, and the Colonial Aesthetic Power in *The Female American*

Abstract

*Drawing from the long history in scholarly research about shipwreck narratives and the colonial times, this article offers some reflections on the different types of shipwreck stories, in order to then focus on the novel *The Female American*, anonymously published in 1767. As a truly transatlantic text, *The Female American* is in conversation with both *The Tempest* (1611) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and as a shipwreck narrative it provides a remarkable model of settler colonialism and extractivist accumulation based equally on aesthetic pleasure and on the symbolic and exchange value of colonial artifacts.*

Keywords: *American studies, The Female American, shipwreck, colonial era, biraciality*

Gonzalo: Je veux dire que si l'île est habitée, comme je le pense, et que nous la colonisons, comme je le souhaite, il faudra se garder comme de la peste d'y apporter nos défauts, oui, ce que nous appellons la civilisation. Qu'ils restent ce qu'ils sont: des sauvages, de bon sauvages, libres, sans complexes ni complications.
(Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête*)

1. Shipwreck narratives

Fascination with the narrative of shipwrecks, from the *Odyssey* to the *Titanic*, to more recent TV series like *Crusoe* (2008), has been quite persistent in the western world and beyond. Scholars usually identify *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, an ancient Egypt tale dating from the Middle Kingdom (circa 2200 BCE) as one of the first examples, followed by others, such as the afore-mentioned *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and a good number of Shakespeare's plays, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Winter's Tale*, and of course *The Tempest*.

According to Josiah Blackmore, from the early period of colonization the “shipwreck narrative” is a truly international genre, that flourishes “in Portugal and will eventually expand northward, reaching the pens of Dutch, English, and French writers.” (2002, xx)

Scholars have identified the early modern period as the moment of transition from an older understanding of disasters at sea to a different vision of seafaring and, consequently, to new epistemological approaches to treating events such as shipwrecks. According to Margaret Cohen: “For millennia, this fascination [with the catastrophe of shipwreck] took the form of horrific images of inaccessible depths, signifying punishment for humans venturing beyond their cosmically drawn limits and transgressing the divine order. In the early modern era, the theological suspicion of seafaring yielded to a view of the sea as a frontier for empowered agency: for exploration, profit, and knowledge” (Cohen 2019, 155).

From a merely quantitative point of view, the increase in maritime traffic determined a larger number of shipwrecks, and, consequently, enhanced the popularity of shipwreck-related stories in literature. To put it more accurately: “With the ‘transoceanic turn’ of the 15th century, and thereafter the transition into early modernity, the shipwreck theme became far more pronounced in western art and literature.” In fact,

If the activities of figures like Vasco da Gama, Columbus, and Magellan opened up the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans to European mariners and led to increasingly global networks of overseas trade, they also greatly escalated the number of shipwrecks suffered by European ships. This, in turn, generated a flourishing popular literature of real-life shipwreck accounts. (Thompson 2013, 9)

Since its origin a popular genre, the shipwreck narrative is also a fascinating cultural artifact, where different epistemologies contribute to combine scientific knowledge with existential contemplation and speculation.

In the context of our study of coastlines and bodies of water, the shipwreck as a calamitous event is noteworthy because it represents the ultimate encounter of land, sea and the human element. By exemplifying a unique mixture of spectacular natural forces and human predicament, it becomes a useful and enlightening perspective in order to ponder over the role of the coast as a traditional locus of encounter and crisis since the colonial era. Furthermore, because one of the common traits of shipwreck narratives is their experimenting with extravagant tales, imagining possibilities that would seem absolutely improbable if not impossible in the metropole or on the continent, such stories reveal how the generative power of the “naufagic imagery” (Thompson 2013, 4) allows for a range of representations of the challenges that the indomitable force of nature poses to human technology. In the historical

context of early modern and colonial times, these stories depict microcosms of imperial projects, utopian fantasies, and alternative economic models for society, where power and commercial relations are in some cases reassessed.

In recent years a number of books¹ have studied the shipwreck not only as an event, but also as a literary motif, a metaphor, or a philosophical condition. This potent richness derives from Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, where he describes the philosopher as a spectator on land, watching a shipwreck at sea.² This contemporary scholarly attention demonstrates the unwavering interest for, and resonance of, such a topos in our own times, when the Mediterranean space still continues to be disseminated with corpses of refugees and migrants trying to cross that body of water, in such extreme conditions as to be reminiscent of other, more ancient, shipwrecked humans on the same shores. The coastlines, now as in the past, remain equally places of encounters, crises, and exploitative economic treatments.

Drawing from the long history in scholarly research about shipwreck narratives and the colonial times, in what follows I will offer some reflections on the different types of shipwreck stories, in order to then direct my attention to the novel *The Female American*, anonymously published in 1767. As a truly transatlantic text, *The Female American* is in conversation with both *The Tempest* (1611) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and as a shipwreck narrative it provides a remarkable model of settler colonialism and extractivist accumulation based equally on aesthetic pleasure and on the symbolic and exchange value of colonial artifacts. As different scholars have noted, the term shipwreck encompasses a variety of forms of maritime mishap and disaster. In fact,

A shipwreck can be both an object and an event. As object, a wreck is the physical remnant(s) of a boat or ship that has run aground, sunk, or in some other way become so significantly damaged that it is no longer properly operable as a sailing vessel. As event, a wreck is the process by which a boat or ship is destroyed or disabled. (Thompson 2013, 4)

Paired with the shipwreck narrative we find, of course, a “long and prolific tradition of castaway narratives” (Thompson 2013, 5).

Most texts adopt quite an expansive understanding of what constitutes a shipwreck, indicating by this term any kind of disaster at sea, or maritime tragedy involving the destruction of a vessel associated to the precarious fortunes and misfortunes of one individual,

¹ To name a few: Ruiz and Rodríguez-Guridi 2022; Mentz 2015; Thompson 2013; Blackmore 2002; Blumenberg 1996.

² According to Steve Mentz, Lucretius’s topos “emphasizes the power of the philosophical mind, resting firm on the bedrock of reason, to make sense of the world’s disorder” (2009, 21).

the castaway. In this article, however, I would like to focus on a specific kind of shipwreck, the maroonage,³ because I am interested in examining the coastal locus in its particular structures of power, and the economic exchanges deriving from them. As is well known, the term marooning means “to put ashore on a desolate island or coast and leave to one’s fate” (Merriam Webster). In what I define the ‘maroonage event’ the natural elements are not the ones responsible for the crisis and the subsequent disastrous and perilous conditions of the people marooned, but it is human agency that condemns somebody to be abandoned on an uninhabited island or in some remote locations on the coast, with little or nothing to live upon. While in both cases—in the shipwreck narrative and in the maroonage narrative—the figure of the castaway individual is central, I would like to emphasize some dissimilarities concerning the balance of the forces in these two types of shipwrecks. Differently from the shipwreck caused by the natural elements, in the maroonage narrative what guides the action are the decisions made onboard the ship by humans: they are the prevalent ones, and the natural forces are kept in the background, so to speak. The natural world is the framework in which the human element plays the major role, both in the decision-making process of abandoning somebody, and in the survival strategies employed by the castaway in order to learn about the new environment to be used for his or her own self-preservation.

2. The maroonage narrative

One text that can be illuminating when looking at the differences between these two types of narratives is *The Tempest*, since it features both the shipwreck and the maroonage. Furthermore, Shakespeare’s play is a useful point of departure to be invoked at the outset of my analysis, as it has become a cornerstone in discussions about the colonial enterprise and the ‘brave new world,’ with numberless re-writings and adaptations, such as Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*, where the colonial and imperialistic implications of the play are highlighted and addressed explicitly.

At the inception of *The Tempest* (1611), the audience is immediately catapulted into the storm caused by Prospero’s magic. This storm will cause the shipwreck of the vessel where Prospero’s enemies, his usurper brother and complicit allies, are traveling, consigning them to the spot chosen by the magician: the island where he has been living for the last twelve years.

³ I borrow this term from Richard Bodek and Joseph Kelly, who, in the introduction to their edited volume *Maroons and the Marooned: Runaways and Castaways in the Americas*, explain their coinage thus: “for the volume at hand, we have coined the term maroonage, meant both to signal the similarity and difference between castaways and true maroons” (Bodek and Kelly 2020, xii).

The violence of the elements and the supposedly egalitarian treatment by the storm are well represented by the boatswain’s words to the courtier Gonzalo, who had just intimated the officer to “remember whom thou hast aboard.” The answer of the sailor—“None that I more love than myself”—is quite telling of the hierarchy, or lack thereof, governing the maritime environment and especially the disaster moment, when, in some cases, every person is equal to any other. The boatswain, in fact, ironically reminds Gonzalo that at sea there are different sets of rules, and the authority extended on land cannot be used on the natural elements:

Boats.: “You are a counselor; if you can command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the presence, we will not hand a rope more; use your authority: if you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it is so hap. Cheerly good hearts! Out of our way, I say.” (1987, 5)

Gonzalo’s political influence has no place or function on the ship, and during these topical moments of crisis, when there is literally nothing he can exert his authority onto, the courtly man, deficient in his maritime knowledge and understanding, becomes an obnoxious presence, an unnecessary surplus, neither useful nor valuable.

We know that this particular and spectacular tempest is not a natural occurrence, but a magical trick conceived by Prospero and enacted by Ariel. Nonetheless, especially for its contrived nature, it is useful in demonstrating how, in this specific imperial context, disasters at sea were often represented, ontologically, as egalitarian events, where survival was a matter of chance rather than a prerogative of class, or race. However, when we read Olaudah Equiano we learn differently: on the slave ship, in fact, there is a different kind of hierarchy of survival. In Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), when he writes about a shipwreck he suffered, he very clearly states that only his maritime knowledge, and his fighting the captain’s orders that wanted the slaves onboard nailed down in the hold, will save everybody and will re-establish equal possibilities of survival.⁴ In this

⁴ “The captain immediately ordered the hatches to be nailed down on the slaves in the hold, where there were above twenty, all of whom must unavoidably have perished if he had been obeyed. When he desired the man to nail down the hatches I thought that my sin was the cause of this, and that God would charge me with these people’s blood. This thought rushed upon my mind that instant with such violence, that it quite overpowered me, and I fainted. I recovered just as the people were about to nail down the hatches; perceiving which, I desired them to stop. The captain then said it must be done: I asked him why? He said that every one would endeavour to get into the boat, which was but small, and thereby we should be drowned; for it would not have carried above ten at the most. I could no longer restrain my emotion, and I told him he deserved drowning for not knowing how to navigate the vessel; and I believe the people would have tossed him overboard if I had given them the least hint of it. However the hatches were not nailed down; and, as none of us could leave the vessel then on

regard, Olaudah Equiano’s text is especially valuable, since it clearly complicates the notion of the shipwreck as an uncontrollable disaster, contesting the widespread assumption of its being a somewhat democratic and egalitarian event, either guided or ignored by Providence, and involving each and every person onboard a ship. On the contrary, Equiano demonstrates how a number of elements enter the equation of salvation, including maritime knowledge, race and class, but also, as we will see in *The Female American*, gender and age.

As Linebaugh and Rediker expound in their *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the ship, from the 17th century onward, becomes a complex system of power, both reflecting and challenging the structures of influence and authority operating on land: “The ship [...] became both an engine of capitalism in the wake of the bourgeois revolution in England *and* a setting of resistance” (2000, 144, emphasis in the original). Rediker’s point about the centrality of the ship in this period is an important argument to make, since the ship, as a set of economic relations and an infrastructure of power, plays a considerable role in establishing a hierarchy of security and safety, which can be transferred or reversed in the coastal experience of the maroonage event. The class differences and the structures of power are even more evident when we look at the practice of marooning, the decision of deliberately casting somebody adrift, or abandoning them on a remote piece of land, usually a deserted island. Once again, *The Tempest* might help in understanding the premises and implications of such a maritime (and piratical) custom. Prospero, in fact, devises his storm and the consequent shipwreck because years earlier, along with his infant daughter, he had been left adrift at sea, and his dukedom usurped by his brother. In this case, as in most cases of maroonage, a power struggle is at the core of the decision: Prospero is physically removed from the dukedom, “hurried [...] aboard a bark” (1987, 18) so that his brother Antonio could take his place in the government of the city of Milan. Prospero and Miranda’s deliverance is ascribed to Providence, and to the human component of Gonzalo’s help, as the magician reveals to his daughter:

Miranda: “How came we ashore?”
 Pros.: “By Providence divine,
 Some food we had, and some fresh water, that
 A noble Neapolitan, Gonzalo,
 Out of his charity, who being then appointed
 Master of this design, did give us, with

account of the darkness, and as we knew not where to go, and were convinced besides that the boat could not survive the surfs, we all said we would remain on the dry part of the vessel, and trust to God till daylight appeared, when we should know better what to do” (Equiano 2001, 168).

Rich garments, linens, stuffs and necessaries,
 Which since have steaded much; so, of his gentleness,
 Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnish'd me
 From mine own library with volumes that
 I prize above my dukedom.” (1987, 20)

Differently from the labor and the resourcefulness employed by Robinson Crusoe in order to salvage as many useful items as possible from the shipwrecked vessel near the coast, in this case a number of objects are delivered to Prospero, things that are not mechanical tools or practical goods useful for surviving at sea or on a faraway location. Along with the basic food and water, the Duke receives from Gonzalo the emblems of his mastery and class: “Rich garments, linens, stuffs and necessaries” and again “volumes that I prize above my dukedom” (1987, 20). These objects have the symbolic value of signifying his power and his status, they are connected to his role, and attached to his body, since they go where Prospero goes. They are part of what Pierre Bourdieu defines “field of power,” where these specific things are symbolic forms of capital.⁵ They guarantee the preservation and perpetuation of Prospero’s power, even on a remote island, where, thanks to his books and his magic robes, he can exercise his dominance and subjugate the native inhabitants Caliban and Ariel:⁶ the Duke’s influence is a combination of magic knowledge, represented by the books, and symbolic/visual power, inscribed in his rich garments, that will allow Prospero to gain control over nature, the ‘natural’ inhabitants, the other humans and their political future. Because only in the maroonage event chance is dispelled by the decision-making process of the humans, some specific and selected objects can be delivered to the castaway. This ensures the creation of a new ecosystem of influence on the coastal location, advantageous for the stranded individual, in this case Prospero.

The more or less explicit presence of social categories and power struggles are intrinsic in the term ‘maroonage,’ in its etymological and social origin. In fact, as many scholars recognize, and as a recent book clearly expressed it in its very title—*Maroons and the Marooned*⁷—

⁵ “‘Symbolic capital’ is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a ‘credit’ which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees ‘economic’ profits” (Bourdieu 1993, 75).

⁶ Ariel is particularly crucial here, as Monique Allewaert in her *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropic* illustrates: “Ariel, a figure for the elemental natural world that he personifies and for the subaltern human beings whom he approximates in his indentured servitude, anticipates the conjunction of the colonial natural world and colonized human beings” (2013, 1).

⁷ This volume includes the essay “Bookends of History: Maroonage in *The Female American* and *Die Wand*” by Peter Sands, which discusses *The Female American* and *Die Wand* as

etymologically speaking the term ‘marooning’ is linked to ‘maroon,’ from the Spanish *cimarrón*, “the term [...] used (first metaphorically, then literally) to describe [...] Africans [who] slipped their shackles and escaped into the wilderness, where, according to the Spanish point of view, they reverted to their own wildness” (Bodek and Kelly 2020, xi).

I believe that for advancing the analysis of this particular type of coastal/exile condition, where the human and societal features are so crucially embedded in the natural ecosystem, it is fruitful to keep in mind both the racial element and the creation of a racially inflected environment. Sylviane Diouf’s words about black maroons can further explicate the relation of these people with the territory: “Autonomy was at the heart of their project and exile the means to realize it. The need for foolproof concealment, the exploitation of their natural environment, and their stealth raids on farms and plantations were at the very core of their lives. Secrecy and the particular ecology of their refuges forced them to devise specific ways to occupy the land and to hide within it” (Diouf 2014, 2).

3. *The Female American*

The political project of the previously enslaved maroons is distinctive in its aim and goals, but the relation with a specific geographic location, the “exploitation of their natural environment” (Diouf), along with the mandate of secrecy and mystery are relevant aspects of *The Female American*. In this novel the reader witnesses the astounding adventures of a young biracial heiress, Eliza Unca Winkfield, who, after being marooned on an unidentified island, manages to impersonate a local divinity, and to colonize and convert an indigenous people to Christianity. Similarly to the American maroons discussed by Diouf, Unca Eliza also engulfs her experience on the island within an aura of secrecy⁸ which constitutes the premise for establishing a social alternative to the domestic immobility of the women at home, and to the imperial and colonial project at work globally. In the coastal environment, and in her own experience of maroonage, Unca Eliza not only exploits the riches offered by the island, but she also builds a complex—and new—epistemology of aesthetic pleasure, symbolic value and exchange economy that differs from the imperial project of Robison Crusoe, and from the colonial efforts of Prospero.

presenting “a prescient view of the modern era and an elegiac backward glance at what a world constructed around an ecofeminist politics of affective community might have wrought,” concentrating on the two concepts of maroonage and utopia (Bodeck and Kelly 2020, 99).

⁸ When she decides to live with the indigenous population, Unca Eliza prescribes a certain number of rules: “You must obey my commands, observe my instructions, never ask who I am, from whence I come, or whether, or when, I will leave you” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 123).

First published anonymously in London in 1767 as *The Female American; or, the Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield*, this 18th-century text has firmly established itself within the radar of early American studies especially after the Broadview Press reprinting in 2001, edited by Michelle Burnham and James Freitas.

The narrator, Unca Eliza Winkfield, is a biracial, highly mobile heroine, born in the American colonies. Her mother, Unca, an Indian princess, is a Pocahontas figure⁹ who intercedes for the safety of the British colonist William Winkfield, thus welcoming him in her Native American community. After marrying him, she gives birth to Unca Eliza, but this union turns out not to be particularly felicitous, as Unca Eliza’s mother is killed by her jealous sister, prompting Winkfield to return to England with the young heroine. The text makes it immediately clear that Unca Eliza is an heiress in possession of a large fortune, which comprises William Winkfield’s exploitative “plantation” in Virginia, and the “great quantity of gold dust and precious stones and many curiosity peculiar to the Indians” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 55) bestowed upon the couple by the Indian king. In England, at her uncle’s house, Unca Eliza acquires a proper upper class British education, learning Greek and Latin alongside the Anglican doctrine. Despite the education she receives, she continues to affirm her biraciality and her complex cultural heritage, and makes no effort to assimilate. After crossing the Atlantic Ocean again in order to see her native country and her father, who had returned to his plantation, she learns of her father’s decision to “remove his great wealth to England and [prepare] to dispose of his plantation” (2014, 61). However, William Winkfield dies before accomplishing his return trip. At this point, after realizing that she had “nothing now to attach [her] to this country, and the bulk of [her] great fortune lying in England” (2014, 62), Unca Eliza decides to go back to her uncle’s family in England with a group of her slaves. The judgment about which captain to choose for this final crossing proves inauspicious, since he tries to force Unca Eliza to marry his son in order to gain access to her enormous fortune. Her refusal results in the killing of her slaves, and her being marooned on an uninhabited island, in a scene reminiscent of typical maritime and colonial ferocity. In this coastal and exiled condition, she perfectly embeds herself in this new ecosystem: she refashions her new persona as a blending of Prospero and Sycorax, by first impersonating an idol, and afterwards managing to convince the indigenous population that she is God’s envoy who had come to proselytize and instruct them in the ways of Christianity.

From the first chapter, the text challenges the well-established dichotomy between male adventures and female domesticity:

⁹ For a complete analysis of the novel’s treatment of the Pocahontas myth, see Joseph 2000.

The lives of women being commonly domestick, the occurrences of them are generally pretty nearly of the same kind; whilst those of men, frequently more vagrant, subject them often to experience greater vicissitudes, many times wonderful and strange. Though a woman, it has been my lot to have experienced much of the latter; for so wonderful, strange, and uncommon have been the events of my life. (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 45)

After immediately preparing the reader for “wonderful, strange and uncommon [...] events,” the text proceeds to present adventures that can be ascribed to the ‘robinsonade’ genre, in a way that has been alternatively regarded as a critique of the colonial and imperial enterprises, through the recasting of the Robinson figure in terms of a more benevolent, Native-Christian missionary type, or as a re-enactment of gender binaries and women’s and Native Americans’ limitations. This latter view is clearly expressed by Maria O’Malley:

Unca Eliza claims to ameliorate the conditions under which Europeans took control of the new world, but she furthers the imperial project for her own sake even as she indicts the methodology of those who exploited Native Americans during conquest. She does not balk from using exploitative means to force Native people to convert to Christianity while fostering her own sense of power. The novel achieves this slanted telling by relying on a woman as its colonizing agent. (O’Malley 2016, 639)

While I cannot disagree with O’Malley’s point, and I am convinced that it is extremely important to point out the gender of the heroine in connection with her colonizing project, I also believe that *The Female American*, through the figure of Unca Eliza, provides a complex view of colonial relations, which cannot rest on such discrete dichotomies, because they are rooted in multiple systems of economic exchanges.

Following Anna Brickhouse’s astute reading, I concur with her in noticing the text’s ambivalence about representations of colonialism. According to Brickhouse: “the novel advocates the unsettlement of America on a single island of the extended Caribbean, a hemispheric south of past and future plantations running from the novel’s colonial Virginia to Crusoe’s ‘Brasils’” (2016, 117). It is indeed especially fruitful to posit *The Female American* within hemispheric spheres of economic exchange, where the presence of diamonds and gold is as relevant as the attendance of Indian enslaved people. Such precious materials and artifacts, with their aesthetic worth and exchange value, are a constant feature of Unca Eliza’s person and her transforming roles, and they demand further attention in any analysis of the novel. As noted recently by both Chloe Wigston Smith and Emilia Abbé, this text is rife with symbolic and significant objects: “*The Female American* proves alert to the imaginative connections between women and travel, materiality and writing, texts and objects, rendering

these connections visible and vital in different yet no less tactile ways” (Wigston Smith 2017, 67).

One of the earliest examples of Unca Eliza’s self-perception and self-fashioning is found in her description of her apparel, through which she reinforces a matrilineal cultural heritage. When still in England, she acknowledges the racial distinction of her “tawny complexion” and takes the time to describe in incredible details her fashion choices, derived from her mother’s aesthetics:

My mother used to dress me in a kind of mixed habit, neither perfectly in the Indian, nor yet in the European taste, either of a fine white linen or a rich silk. I never wore a cap, but my lank black hair was adorned with diamonds and flowers. In the winter I wore a kind of loose mantle or cloak, which I used occasionally to wear on one shoulder, or to cast it behind me in folds, tied in the middle with a ribband, which gave it a pleasing kind of romantic air. My arms were also adorned with strings of diamonds, and one of the same kind surrounded my waist. I frequently diverted myself with wearing the bow and arrow the queen my aunt left me. (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 58)

The picture she paints is so striking that the first American edition of the novel contains an engraving reproducing Unca’s attire, showing her jewels and her bow and arrow, in the iconographic tradition of representations of coastal encounters and visual depictions of the Americas.¹⁰ If Abbé regards Unca Eliza as functioning, “in varying capacities, as a cultural artifact or as a spectacle of curiosity surrounding Native Americans and Native American hybridity” (Abbé 2019, 39), thus linking this visual image with “British popular culture, [which], framed Native Americans and their cultural products in sensational and exotic terms, cultivating a mythos of noble savagery or barbaric primitivism” (Abbé 2019, 42), I believe that it would be interesting to dwell on the aesthetic pleasure and defiance expressed by Unca Eliza through her clothes. As she describes her dealings with the “neighboring gentry,” she emphasizes the “grand manner in which [she] appeared,” implying that if they treated her “in a degree little inferior to that of a princess,” it was quite correct, since, on the death of her aunt, “the Indians made [her] a formal tender of the crown to [her]; but [she] declined it” (2014, 58). Unca Eliza, while in England, portrays herself as a quasi-princess, and, as this will not be Unca Eliza’s last encounter with a crown, it is pertinent to notice that jewels and adornments are part and parcel of her self-representation, every time she needs to assert her social and political status. If this claim to a certain type of preference for a hybrid taste is not dissimilar from Peter Williamson’s use of his Native costume both in North America and in his

¹⁰ See Susan Scott Parrish’s essay “Epistemology of the Coast: From Columbus to Esi Edugyan’s *Washington Black*,” in this same issue.

native Scotland,¹¹ my contention with regards to Unca Eliza is that she uses these particular objects to build an aesthetic capital for herself, which she can easily translate into a cultural and symbolic capital.

If we consider the public image presented by Unca Eliza, the contemporary readers of this novel would have recognized the latest fashion in Georgian England, when “diamonds emerge as the most highly prized gem of the period.” According to Hanna Greig, “it was only in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that heavy gold jewellery embedded with the richly coloured rubies and emeralds favoured by Renaissance and early modern European elites was supplanted by jewellery dominated by the dazzling but colourless diamond.” Diamonds are obvious symbols of the extractivist and exploitative colonial practices, when “the discovery of new diamond supplies and the opening of new mines in Brazil stimulated trade, and the development of new cutting techniques maximized their allure” (Greig 2013, 49). By specifying her choice of diamonds, therefore, Unca Eliza not only proves her active participation in the global market for colonial luxury goods, and its capitalist exploitative capacity, but she also demonstrates that she is aware of the shaping of taste, and the ways in which diamonds are changing the representation of the upper classes, and women’s circulation in the echelons of society, exactly because of the stones’ intrinsic qualities and crafted reverberation:

The light-refracting qualities of the diamond made it the ideal ornament for Georgian candle-lit social encounters, and the refinement of the brilliant cut (introduced from the 1710s) purposefully enhanced its sheen. Indeed, the expensive and highly skilled craftsmanship required to transform the unpromising black stones extracted from the mine into shimmering gems contributed to their magical appeal and, of course, to their market cost. (Greig 2013, 49)

Arjun Appadurai persuasively proposes “that we regard luxury goods not so much in contrast to necessities (a contrast filled with problems), but as goods whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*. The necessity to which *they* respond is fundamentally political” (Appadurai 1986, 38, emphasis in the original). In this novel, the sumptuous objects to which Unca Eliza has access to are incarnated signs of an aesthetic and

¹¹ Peter Williamson is the author of an Indian captivity narrative, *French and Indian Cruelty; Exemplified in the Life and various vicissitudes of Fortune of Peter Williamson Who Was Carried off from Aberdeen in His Infancy, and Sold as a Slave in Pennsylvania* (1757). According to Timothy J. Shannon, “As the author and performer of his own story, Williamson helped shape his audiences’ perceptions of the British Empire’s racial and cultural geography” (Shannon 2018, 7).

cultural capital that she uses to gain and solidify her role in a composite global world, not only in England, but also on an unidentified Atlantic island. This will appear even more clearly during her maroonage experience, where the coastal location and the island geomorphology will play crucial roles in her economic transactions.

Similarly to Prospero’s ordeal, Unca Eliza is abandoned on a (likely Caribbean) island by the captain during her transatlantic voyage, and the objects she is granted are her bow, quiver and arrows, along with a box of clothes. We will learn later that the box contains also books, once again associating Unca Eliza’s maroonage endowment to Prospero’s volumes and rich garments. However, while Prospero’s objects are intransitive—they are linked inextricably to his person— Unca Eliza during her time on the island combines different kinds of possession, acquisition and extraction. On this island she is not the British heiress, nor the Native American princess but she is both, and more. As explained by Ralph Bauer: “In the geopolitical constellations of the European settler empires in America before the 19th century, the Creole descendants of the European conquerors often occupied an ‘ambiguous’ social and legal space, neither colonized nor colonizers but rather *colonials*” (2003, 5, emphasis in the original). Like this group, the colonial Unca Eliza occupies a multilayered landscape of global encounters, made even more complex by the coastal location.

Consistent with the tradition of shipwreck narratives, when Unca Eliza finds herself on the island, she starts exploring, and thanks to a manuscript she finds among some ruins, she learns some crucial pieces of information: every year a great number of Indians come to the island in order to worship an “ancient idol sacred to the sun” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 81), obviously implying that the island itself is regarded as sacred, a sanctuary for some indigenous population. This extraordinary plot twist allows for a very fascinating web of relations to develop, both between Unca Eliza and the island as a geomorphological and historical location; and between the heroine and a number of Indian figures, with whom she engages in a power play based on religious (and aesthetic) authority.

During her inspections aimed at finding the idol, Unca Eliza uncovers an incredibly complex sacred architecture, both above ground and underground. It is in fact underground that she discovers the history of the place:

The first room I entered, I found surrounded with mummies, like those I have read of in the histories of Egypt, and one of which I once saw in England. [...] Observing Indian characters upon each of them finely painted [...] I examined them more nicely. As I understood the Indian languages perfectly, I soon learned that these had been priests of the sun. (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 81)

In a few lines, Unca Eliza is posited within the geologic genealogy of the subterranean temple from whence she will gather not only valuable information, but also precious artifacts. Her hybrid self helps decipher the mummy as a relic similar to the one she visited in England and studied in English books, while her knowledge of the “Indian languages” enables her to understand the indigenous language. In this way she becomes part of an even more complex tradition that includes the subterranean existence of an ancient and wealthy civilization, which her unique position (as a castaway, erudite, exiled, biracial, bilingual heiress) allows her to access epistemologically and materially. She assumes the indigeneity of the island’s culture by proxy, because she belongs to a Native American tradition, and it is exactly in this privileged position that she can control a number of commercial paths and exchanges, within transatlantic spheres of trade, thus reaching a level of power that she could not have had in either England or Virginia.

In the historical/geological formation of the island, Unca Eliza finds herself able to occupy a vacuum in power, perfectly exemplified by her discovery and inhabitation of the idol. In the course of one of her explorations she comes across the gigantic statue: “the image itself, of gold, greatly exceeded human size, it resembled a man clad in a long robe or vest; [...] on the head was a curiously wrought crown [...] I ascended the steps, and threw a stone at the image, and found it was hollow” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 86). The hollowness of the statue, and her capacity to occupy that space, engulfing herself in gold and power, are preparatory to her finding “an immense treasure” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 87) in the subterranean part of the temple, where the artistic display and aesthetic pleasure overshadow the exchange value of the gold:

a great number of rings, bracelets, lamps, and crowns. [...] Among [the] vestments were some of more extraordinary workmanship and richness. The largest was, as it were, sprinkled over with precious stones, and here and there a large diamond. [...] Near this was a crown of most exquisite make, richly beset with precious stones of various sizes and colours; one on the top particularly large, which emitted from all parts of it a light greater than that of my lamp. (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 87)

This treasure trove is evocative of the *Arabian Nights*¹² description of other exotic riches, but what is interesting here is that the encounter with these objects (including crowns, universal symbols of power) is preliminary to Unca’s entering the statue, and fitting perfectly in that hollow space: “At last I got quite into the body of it, and my head within the head of it. There

¹² *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* (1706-1721) is the very first translation in English of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

were holes through the mouth, eyes, nose, and ears of it; so that I could distinctly see all over the island before me, of which the height I was gave me a great command. I indeed thought I could even behold the sea” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 88). By placing Unca Eliza inside the hollow statue, at the center of the sacred ground, and able to overlook the island, including the sea, the text posits her in control of the geographical landscape (and seascape), capable of enforcing the power of her voice, that, similarly to the light reverberating from the diamonds, and thanks to the acoustic knowledge of the ancients, can be projected far away, and with authority: “This image, particularly the head of it, it seems, was so wonderfully constructed as to increase the sound of even a low voice to such a degree as to exceed that of the loudest speaker” (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 88). By choosing to speak as the oracle (when she later interpellates the indigenous population) she becomes not only the voice of religious authority, but, even more remarkably, also the voice of gold, as the symbol and catalyst of colonial riches, power, and craftsmanship. As Bourdieu states: “utterances are not only [...] signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also *signs of wealth*, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and *signs of authority*, intended to be believed and obeyed” (Bourdieu 1991, 66, emphasis in the original). By speaking from inside a golden statue of religious significance and historical import, Unca Eliza is perfectly in control of her utterances as signs of wealth and signs of authority.

In her gradual approach to (albeit briefly) embodying the sovereignty of the island, she decides to encounter the indigenous population by impersonating a religious emissary, in order to transition this community to a Christian faith. As Wigston Smith observes,

Her manipulation of material culture not only recalls her intercultural dress but also suggests the value of material objects to colonisation and religious conversion. [...] The ancient jewels and clothes elevate Unca Eliza’s status, recalling how her strings of diamonds impressed her English neighbours. In England and on the Atlantic island Unca Eliza marshals clothes and accessories to proclaim her social and religious authority. (Wigston Smith 2017, 78)

However, when the text describes the process of her clothing to present herself to the islanders as the highest authority, the same paragraph used before is reposed, with the notable difference that she is not a spectator anymore, but at this point she possesses the ancient artifacts, and she uses them not only to visibly impress her new congregation, but also for their power to adorn. Joe Conway rightly emphasizes that “Far from being set aside from circulation as an abstract general equivalent of value, Indian gold in *The Female American* enjoys more various signifying capacity, capable of conferring social status, political power,

and religious significance to those who physically horde it, adorn themselves in it, and gift it to others” (2016, 679).

By the time Unca Eliza plans her reinvention as a Christian prophet, she is epistemologically in control of the island, as an explorer and a naturalist. Furthermore, as the writer of her story and the owner of the manuscript, she is in control of the material colonial archive of this place. She is not only a colonizer, or colonist, but at the same time an artistic, cultural and religious mediator, as she is the producer of the meaning and value of the new trajectory of this ‘colony.’ For this reason, when she clothes herself to encounter the indigenous population, she does not hesitate to choose the crown for herself:

On my head I placed a crown of most exquisite make, richly beset with precious stones of various sizes and colours; one on the top particularly large, which emitted from all parts of it a light greater than that of either of my lamps. In my right hand I held a golden staff, or rod, with a small image of the sun on top of it. On one of my fingers I wore the ring, and on each arm a rich bracelet, all which I found at the same time I discovered all these other things.

I had made myself a kind of wicker basket, which I filled with a great number of gold rings, all from the same repository. When I first discovered all these treasures, I then little thought they would prove of any real use to me. Nor did I now thus adorn myself from pride; but I thought the extraordinary appearance that they would give me, might procure me a more favourable reception. (Burnham and Freitas 2014, 121)

It is through this “extraordinary appearance” that she wants to gain not only religious, but also social control over the indigenous community. With this figure, she claims the symbolic power to consecrate herself through usurped artifacts, but she also retains control of a number of economic practices that are colonial, pre-capitalist and capitalist. In her offering of the rings,¹³ she does not only enact a colonial practice of infantilization of the indigenous population, but she also re-circulates within the manufacturer community the products of their skills, and she partakes in a pre-capitalist model of creating sociability, trust, and pleasure, as Appadurai remarks: “Gifts, and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities” (Appadurai 1986, 11).

¹³ “As soon as all were silent again, I sat down, and taking out of my twig-basket two of the best rings, I presented them to the high-priest, and to each of the priests two others, near in goodness to those of the high-priest’s; when, finding that I had a sufficient number of rings, I desired the people to come to me one by one, and I presented each with a ring, which they all received with great expressions of joy” (Burnham and Freitas 2014,123).

While she uses a pre-capitalist (and colonial) offering of gifts, she recognizes the exchange value of gold, and its mighty force in the mercantile and imperial world. The text is in fact regularly interspersed with moments when the riches are sent back to England, especially when she decides to permanently reside on the island. I believe that it is precisely the experience of maroonage on the island, the coastal geomorphology and archeology, and the liminal economy at the periphery of the empire (and not only her biracial and bilingual capacity for mediation) that allows Unca to enter and negotiate all these complex and overlapping economic systems. With the “exquisite crown on her head,” at that precise moment, she lies at the intersection of a series of economic systems, where gifts are not in opposition to the plundering and extractivist process of acquiring already manufactured artifacts, ready to enter and participate in the global market of colonial commodities.

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