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# Pledging Allegiance to the Name of the Father: A Hegelo-Lacanian Reading of The (Fe)male American

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## Introduction

For what is in circulation, the predominant critical readings of, and commentary on, the early American novel, *The Female American*, embrace both feminist and historicist approaches to the text. Such theoretical vantage points purport that this text, deemed a *Robinsoniad*, replaces the masculine thrust of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with that of a feminine register, involving a complex process, so the argument goes, of transforming Defoe's original "castaway narrative into one of female self-fashioning and into a critique of colonialism at the same time" (Joseph 2000: 318). A not so dissimilar perspective is shared by Kristianne Kalata Vaccaro, her claim being that *The Female American's* protagonist, Unca, occupies what Sandra Gustafson calls "a liminal space that

encouraged cultural mixing,” simultaneously challenging social hierarchies and blurring “boundaries of genre, gender and nation” (Vacarro 2008: 127-150).

Such perspectives are not entirely off target; that *The Female American* deviates radically in its narratology from its contemporaries is, without question, an accurate reflection. One concern, however, is that the foremost theoretical readings of this text, albeit legitimate by their own lights, neglect to endorse a different duplet of theory altogether, which imbues the text throughout: Slavoj Žižek's hermeneutics of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Hegel's complex dialectics. It is precisely by means of elucidating the ways in which this theoretical pair is at work in *The Female American*, that the following argument will be hoisted: despite the text's ostensible subversion of the masculinist narrative, *The Female American* is to be read as a narrative that does very little in terms of undermining imbalanced orders of its day (such as masculine oriented cultural hegemony and colonialism).

The aim of this paper is twofold, inaugurated by the horns of a dilemma. On the one horn, there appears to be a transgressive aspect to *The Female American*: it usurps the masculine role of the standard castaway narrative of its time, and, as such, creates a new space from which a feminist critique is able to render the colonial projects of the West viciously inane in all their horrific absurdity. On the other horn, however, we have quite the opposite account: nothing more than a total reinscription of the masculine universality of Western ideology, by means of Unca's narrative itself. In the latter case, despite what seems to be a “feminine” register of discourse presented by *The Female American*, such a register nonetheless remains marked by one of the Lacanian “names-of-the-father” (which will be expounded on further below). In a strictly Hegelo-Žižekian sense, the aim of this paper departs from the very antagonism laid out above, and shall develop an account for how—apropos of both Hegel's logic of concrete universality, and, homologous to the latter, Lacan's formulae of sexuation—*The Female American* is to be read in the appearance of its opposite: as a narrative that reaffirms the universal (Western) ideology of its time. By means of such an analysis, not only will this paper expound with great detail on Žižek's joyously unorthodox reading of Hegel's concrete universality through Lacan's formulae of sexuation, but, via the latter explication this paper will elucidate how, despite the particular lifeworld Unca inhabits within *The Female American* (that of a female Amerindian), the universal of Western ideology constantly traverses her particular lifeworld, rendering Unca's particular lifeworld an “ideological fake,” one that obfuscates the supremacy of Western abstraction and the criminal

projects carried out under its banner. Thus it is by giving a detailed account of Žižek's unconventional spin on Hegel's concrete universality *à la* Lacan, which this paper shall purport that there is nothing fundamentally "feminist" about *The Female American*, for *The Female American* ultimately reinscribes the masculine order of its time within the very framework of its text.

### **Taking the place of the void**

In *The Female American*, like Crusoe, Unca happens to find herself marooned on an island, having to fend for herself with limited materials from the ship. These limited materials are soon supplemented by Unca's improvised economization of indigenous resources: the milking of wild goats, the employment of the island's natural resources, and so on. Here, one is invited to ask the following question: Is Unca's endeavor of turning to natural resources not the result of a crude dialectical reversal of the phallic function of Defoe's work? Unca begins with a *lack* of the required materials to subsist on the island, and, turning to her own pragmatic agency, employs the island's resources in order to eke out a minimal self-sufficiency. Thus, it is the female character, Unca herself (which, as we will see, represents an original lack that is constitutive of the phallic *jouissance* that is responsible for the dialectic of the male economy, a material order of closure and completeness), that introduces the demand for a supplement, for something fertile and wildly abundant—e.g., the use of the island's natural resources—which promises the satisfaction of an original lack. More importantly, it is Unca herself who fills this lack, who takes the place of this void, precisely by employing her own practical agency in the absence of immediate resources.

Further in the text we discover that, as a slight departure from Crusoe's sequestered backdrop, Unca is not alone on the island. Alongside annual visits paid to the island by the local natives there is a hermit who has lived on the island for forty years, who passes away shortly after introducing himself to Unca, whose manuscript provides Unca with instructions that aid her survival. Here, the hermit appears as a sort of "vanishing mediator"; that is, he represents a transitory stage in the passage of Unca's growth toward self-sufficiency; and his manuscript comes to play the role of yet another object-supplement: viz., the hermit's manuscript, which coincides with the absence of the hermit himself, is operationalized by Unca, whose survival on the island is secured by her use of this manuscript.

Unca's narrative also deviates from that of Crusoe's with regard to her engagement with the native Other. While exploring the island, Unca discovers a temple boasting a statue of the "Oracle of the Sun":

The image itself, of gold, greatly exceeded human size: it resembled a man clad in a long robe or vest; which reached quite down to the pedestal stone of the foundation on which it stood, and lay in folds upon it. This image was girt about the waist as with a girdle, and on each breast gathered to a point, fastened as it were, with a button; the neck and bosom quite bare like the manner of a woman [...]<sup>1</sup>

Unca then discovers a stairway that leads her "into the body [of the oracle], and [her] head within the head of it. There were holes through the mouth, eyes, nose, and ears of it; so [she] could distinctly see all over the island before [her], of which height [she] was at gave [her] a great command."<sup>2</sup> It does not take long for Unca to realize that she, too, can exploit this technology to her advantage; thus beginning her cunning ploy to access the oracle as a means to convert the natives to Christianity. Unca has, once again, assumed the place of a void, the source of power and mastery. As such, she is caught up in the dialectic of male desire (as will be explained further below).

### **The role of '*point de capiton*' in the logic of concrete universality**

Oracles, to put it in Lacanian terms, are the things of the Imaginary order: an object upon which sublimity is placed. The Imaginary corresponds to Lacan's "mirror stage," setting the stage for the fantasies of desire (in the guise of images). It is to be noted, too, that the Imaginary and the Symbolic are inextricably linked. Let us clarify what this means exactly. Placed in the context of *The Female American*, what constitutes the Symbolic order (of Unca's devotion to Christianity) is the Imaginary order (of the pagan oracle). That is to say, within the diegetic economy of Unca's narrative, the pagan oracle functions as a sort of "empty signifier," which—like the function of a Master-Signifier, as the exception to the Symbolic context to which it gives rise—helps anchor the Symbolic structure of her Christian faith. As Žižek writes in *For They Know Not What They Do*, this "reflective signifier totalizes the battery of all others—makes out of them a totality of *all* the others" (Žižek 2008: 25). To further illustrate this, at a subtextual level it is *as if* the oracle itself were claiming: "I'm an exception to *that...*" or, "I represent the opposite of

*that...*—*that*' being the Symbolic order of Christianity. In the text, it is *as if* Christianity requires the enigmatic oracle for its own recognized actuality: By dint of this union of difference between the pagan oracle and Unca's fidelity to Christianity, Christianity is able to assert its Symbolic authority and attain its inner consistency in a state of immediacy in which its presence is immediately actualized in the mode of its opposite—that is to say, Christianity attains its Symbolic closure via the Imaginary oracle-*qua-exception-to-Christianity*. In other words, the pagan oracle, as something opposed to Christianity, as an "excessive protuberance," an exception as such, nonetheless embodies Christianity in the guise of its opposite. Here we have a cogent example of Žižek's rendition of Hegel's dialectic: surplus, subtraction, sublimation—for it is by means of this totalization-via-exemption (a pagan oracle of course has no place in the order of Christian worship) that we arrive at the universality of Unca's devotion to Christianity; a totalizing shift that hinges on her manipulation of the oracle. We can of course liken this to Hegel's example of the monarch, which Žižek himself refers to in much of his work when explaining the logic behind Hegel's concrete universality:

the multitude of individuals, the mass of people [in this case, e.g., the indigenous of the island], is confronted with a unique individual [a Christian Unca in the guise of a deceiving Sun God], the monarch—they are the multitude [...]—he [the monarch] is the immediacy [...] (Hegel 1984: 268)

Therein we have an illustration of Hegel's totalizing logic. This logic also takes place in *The Female American* between Unca and the natives of the island region, who, by way of Unca's manipulation of the oracle, become proselytized into Christians. The oracle, in this sense, functions as a *point de capiton* (quilting point): it "quilts" the heterogeneous field of indigenous particulars into a unified ideological field. We can also liken the oracle to an "empty" signifier: its entire actuality and authority consists in its Name (that of the Sun God). The oracle, as such, thus embodies the function of the Master-Signifier: it is the "One of the Exception, the 'irrational' protuberance of [Unca's Christianity] which transforms [the indigenous particulars] into a concrete totality [...] By means of [the oracle's] ex-sistence of a pure signifier, [it] constitutes the Whole of the [new] social fabric in its 'organic articulations,' the 'irrational' surplus as a condition of the rational totality" (Žižek 2008: 82-3).<sup>3</sup>

We are thus presented with the Hegelian paradox of a “totality which always comprises a particular [exceptional] element embodying its universal structuring principle” (Žižek 2008: 45). By these lights, the Oracle of the Sun does not represent a pagan transgression of (Unca’s) Christianity insofar as it *conceals* an ersatz transgression: In all actuality, the oracle does not conceal any transgression whatsoever; on the contrary, it conceals that *nothing*, in fact, is being transgressed. By means of the pagan oracle, then, Unca is able to Christianize the indigenous of the island precisely as such.

### **The semblance of closure = the concealment of rupture**

At this point, it is important to remind the reader that “Žižek’s Hegel is quite different from the versions of Hegel that usually circulate in [contemporary] Western philosophy” (Parker 2004, 38). For Žižek, Hegel’s dialectic is not a vicious monad; it does not culminate in a closed universal that encompasses *all*. On the contrary, for Žižek, Hegel’s concrete universal is always-already ruptured from within, unable to fully close in on itself. Moreover, amid the multitude of particular elements-to-be-totalized there is always some “irrational” element, an exception as such, which gives rise to the very universal that totalizes the field of particular elements. This “irrational” element gives rise to the (semblance of) “closed” universal precisely by filling in, that is, by concealing the universal’s immanent lack of closure. In other words, this “irrational” element takes the place of such a void (i.e., the universal’s lack of closure), thereby effectuating the appearance, the *semblance*, of the universal’s closure. This, too, is exemplified quite well in *The Female American*, for of course Unca is not the God that the oracle personifies. Her act is to *resemble* the God that the oracle personifies. Is her operation of the oracle, then, not an act of semblance *par excellence*? Žižek writes about semblance, claiming: “[semblance] occurs not when we erect a deceptive screen to conceal our transgression but when we pretend there is a transgression to be concealed” (Žižek 2008: xcvi). In other words, we know very well that Unca is not transgressing her fidelity to Christianity by assuming the role of the natives’ pagan Sun God; she is merely *pretending* to do so—in order to convert the natives, to totalize the field of indigenous particulars into a unified whole of Christian followers: a universal as such.

We can perhaps approximate this act of semblance to the Lacanian notion of “femininity as masquerade”: the relationship between woman and semblance (depicted in *The Female American* by Unca’s performance throughout the text): “semblance is an appearance that conceals a void, a nothingness” (Žižek 2008: xxii). As Hegel would put it, there is, in fact, nothing to be concealed. That is to say, Unca’s narrative, one that putatively puts into question the universality of the European ideology of her time, merely serves to conceal the fact that her narrative does not commit any subversive act as such. In fact, what is really occurring is the opposite: The universal of European ideology of Unca’s time, like any universal ideology, is constantly traversing Unca’s particular lifeworld—precisely because the universal, as such, is not *really* complete, it is not a perfectly closed whole. Attaining the image of wholeness requires a maternal dimension (hence Unca’s role), which, as Todd McGowan puts it, “provides the ideological assurance that underlying the apparent openness of the social order, the signifying system is actually closed” (McGowan 2010). This is precisely the role (of semblance of closure) which Unca, and thus *The Female American*, plays. As such, as something that “fills in” the lack inherent to—and thereby concealing the immanent void which ruptures—the universality of European ideology, *The Female American* aids and abets the dominant Western ideology of its time more so than subverts it.

Another way we can posit the claim that Unca’s feminine disturbance of the standard castaway novel is merely a “re-marking” of the masculine ideology from whence this narrative derives, is by way of the following analogy, by likening the notion of “femininity as masquerade” to a perversion of the standard masculinist story of “woman being man without phallus.” Here we will draw from Žižek’s explanation of the Lacanian logic of sexual difference (Žižek 2008, 44-5): First, there is the standard, sexist, masculinist story: Woman is not complete; unlike man, who is a complete human being, she lacks something: a phallus; therefore, in order for *woman* to attain complete human *Being*, she requires a phallus. But she doesn’t have a phallus, thus she needs man for her completion. Here we have the classic, sexist narrative of male fantasy, which is none other than an analogy for simple universality and its exception. However, the perversion of this perspective, a move that is necessary for grasping the complexity of concrete universality and its exception when read against the latter analogy for simple universality and its exception, is this: We should invert the standard narrative so that absence precedes presence: Man is woman *with* phallus. Here, man is the exception to woman and, together, they comprise the “all” of humanity: man and woman. In this case, what is

purely feminine lacks an exception, and is therefore “not-all”; the purely feminine remains itself—in itself, for itself—resisting inscription into the “all,” existing freely as such, and so on. As Žižek oft puts it, this is the basic starting point for Lacan’s formulae of sexuation: The masculine order “combines universality with its constitutive exception, while the feminine side asserts the “non-all” as the paradoxical obverse of the lack of exception” (Žižek 2001: 91). That is to say, the *appearance* of the masculine (e.g., Unca as a Christian woman—and, at a deeper level, ‘woman’ being the exception to male desire, and thus caught up in the universe of male desire *precisely as its exception*) is equal to universality per se (Unca’s Christianity); and the *truth* of this universality is the very constitutive exception (a Christian Unca masquerading as a pagan god): a (ersatz) transgression that violates (read: summons) the universal order (of Unca’s Christian faith)—*precisely as a means to constitute the universal order* (a proselytized indigenous community). By these lights, *The Female American* is the phallogized “mysterious exception” which *appears* to “resist” masculine universality; i.e., it is a text that *appears* to break the literary consistency of its contemporaries, though, in actuality, it simply re-marks the literary whole it appears to be transgressing!

What one should take away from this is that, the female qua exception is *necessary for*, not a *remainder to*, male universality. Necessary because the female, *precisely as an exception*, is no longer female as “non-all,” viz., the female-qua-exception “*is*” feminine-qua-semblance: that which conceals an original lack, thereby manifesting the semblance of closed wholeness.

### **From sexuation to universality**

Let us now turn for a moment to Lacan’s claim that ‘woman’ does not really exist (here, things get somewhat complex, so this may require more than one read): ‘Woman’ is a name for that which takes the place of an original void: the female; and the void itself is none other than the place of inscription of the feminine qua “non-all”: that which stands separate from the masculine side of sexuation altogether; that which does not cease not to be inscribed in any closed, masculine order of universality. The feminine side of sexuation, then, is the exception to the masculine side. Here, however, *precisely* by dint of being a discernible exception *as such*, the feminine element crosses over in a sort of chiasmic way onto the masculine side of sexuation, that is, the void itself is transpositioned onto the side of masculine sexuation, and into male universality as such.



Thus the female arises on the side of masculine sexuation as its "phallic" exception. Therefore, as the exception, and, following Žižek's dialectical "logic of exemption," the female is then sublated into the (male) universal as such, into the masculine-paternal order of universality, thereby bringing about the closure of the universal precisely by turning female into (maternal) 'woman', into one of the "names-of-the-father," thus concealing the original void, suppressing the presence of the feminine subject qua "non-all." As Žižek frequently reminds us, Lacan defines "masculine" as that which refers to any "closed" order, to universality (and its constitutive exception); and what is "feminine" is to be referred to that which is "open," non-circumscribed and "not-all": the void which ruptures the closure of any universal order. One then has to ask—does Unca not play the role of one of the "names-of-the-father"? Does her character not suppress a purely feminine register in order to maintain some semblance of closure and wholeness?

In any event, we can now see how the masculine side of sexuation acquires its exception, an exception that gives rise to the universal as such. Here we have the "phallicized" female that is fully involved in masculine universality; that which is caught up in the dialectic of male desire, representing the "hysterical" split, which asserts the truth of the universal: As the exception to male universality, the female-qua-exception is that which embodies the very structuring principle for male universality. In other words, the female (in this case, Unca) upholds the appearance of ex-sisting outside the male order, for the sake of indexing and sustaining, holding the place of, the male order "as such." Unca *appears* to resist full inscription; though in actuality she is fully inscribed in the "phallic symbolic function," precisely as its constitutive, phallic exception. This role allows female to *be* the object of phallus (object of desire) while male *has* phallus (desire). And this, of course, is the male fantasy *par excellence*. Again, this is but one side of Lacan's formulae of sexuation.<sup>4</sup> By these lights, man needs woman to "affirm its own reign by means of" the woman's "sublation." Does Unca not play this role to a tee? She presents her narrative (anonymously)—a narrative that is isolated from all others, told from within the confines of her own claimed space of the island—as someone who resists full inscription into the master discourse of her time. But the very fact that her narrative exists as an exception to the narratives of the master discourse of her time merely *re-marks* the master discourse of her time, thereby sustaining the universal space of its abstract reign, opening it up for her own sublation into it, and thereby becoming just another moment of the very universal she is subtended by. In fine, the diegetic content of Unca's narrative (*The Female American* itself) is transposed into a

different modality altogether, which, in effect, presents the diegetic narrative of masculine universality in the guise of its opposite, as that of a *Robinsoniad*.

In the precise sense that the Oracle of the Sun plays a constitutive role in Unca's endeavor to universalize her Christianity throughout the island region, male universality too, is constituted by Unca through the subtraction of herself from a set of particulars, thereby embodying the particular exception of the universal she nonetheless gives rise to. Therein contains the Lacanian "logic of sexual difference," which is at play throughout the text. As Žižek writes, "the set of women is a particular, non-totalized, non-universal set; its multitude acquires the dimension of *universality* (that of 'humankind') as soon as one *excludes* from it an element which thereby embodies humankind as such: man" (Žižek 2001: 91). But perhaps we shouldn't conceive 'man' as being male per se; instead, we should conceive 'man' as merely one of the Lacanian "names-of-the-father"; and here, Unca is exactly that: as female-qua-exception, she plays the role of one of the "names-of-the-father" and is thus a constitutive (moreso than distortive) member of 'man'.

$\forall x$	$\Phi x$	$\overline{\forall x}$	$\Phi x$
$\exists x$	$\overline{\Phi x}$	$\overline{\exists x}$	$\overline{\Phi x}$
masculine		feminine	
Universal function		Not all are submitted to the phallic	
All are submitted to the phallic function		function. But there is no exception	
with one exception.		There is none which is not submitted	
There is one which is not.		to the phallic function	

Herein we have the imbalanced, asymmetrical opposition between man and woman: "*the genus of 'man' has but one species, woman.*"<sup>5</sup> Is this not homologous with the Hegelian paradox of a "totality, which always comprises a particular element embodying its universal structuring principle"?

### **Woman as one of the names-of-the-father**

Contrary to the common doxa that Hegel's logic of concrete universality is insistent on the notion that nothing exists outside the ordered whole, the truth is that this "nothing" from outside is actually situated *within* the universal. Thus universality *per se* is always-already constitutively split, split between its ordered space of male universality and its

immutable, "excessive" void, the latter designating the place of the feminine "non-all." A great example of this is Pythagoras' belief that the origin of the universe could be explained in terms of imposing limit (male) on the limitless (female) by way of injecting unit (woman). But what if it is the other way around? What if it is such that the limitless, the multitude of particulars, holds the limit, the universal itself, in check? What if the infinite (female) is that which ruptures the internal consistency of the finite (male), thereby precipitating the very desire for closure, for the universal unit (name-of-the-father), the latter being that which aims to ensure stability, that which seeks to trammel the wild and timeless fecundity of the limitless unknown? Perhaps, then, one may posit that Unca *does* personify the feminine "non-all"—precisely as that which ruptures the totality of the masculine universal from within, as the excessive exception to the male universal's limited domain; which in turn gives rise to a reinscription of the domain of the male universal?

This may seem very convincing, but it should be noted that a common way of misreading Lacan's formulas of sexuation is to

reduce the difference of the masculine and the feminine side to two formulas that define the masculine position, as if masculine is the universal phallic function and feminine the exception, the excess, the surplus that eludes the grasp of the phallic function. Such a reading completely misses Lacan's point, which is that this very position of the Woman as exception—say, in the guise of the Lady in courtly love—is a masculine fantasy *par excellence*.<sup>6</sup>

Here we have the emergence of 'woman' as one of the Lacanian names-of-the-father.<sup>7</sup> When Žižek resounds Lacan's claim that "Woman is one of the names-of-the-father," he is referring to the notion that, 'woman', precisely as a signifier, plays a delineating role for the entire masculine register and its excess, precisely in the form of the male fantasy as such. That is to say, the ascription of "non-all" to the appearance of woman is the male fantasy *par excellence*: woman as unknown, as non-inscribable, resisting phallic inscription, as a "mystery," etc. As illustrated above, woman as "non-all" merely *sustains* the phallic order of male universality. Is this not the specious "feminine" role that Unca plays? She is fallaciously depicted as the "non-all," but is really none other than an exception to the socio-Symbolic order of her motherland, which merely serves, in the end, to sustain and re-inscribe the socio-Symbolic order of her motherland.

## Concrete universality is constitutively split

Here, one should recall the salient characteristic of Žižek's Hegelian dialectic: that its movement is precipitated by an inherent deadlock: universality is "constitutively split," the movement of Hegel's dialectic is forever in motion in its quest to reconcile an innermost, irresolvable antagonism. Lacan's formulas of sexuation map out this logic of difference: that male and female—and, at a more radical level, subject and object-qua-wholly-other—cannot form a perfect union, for they *do not truly know each other completely*; hence the impossibility of the sexual relationship and the irreducibility of pure difference. It is this intrinsic split—embodied by separate entities which can never fully fathom each other, a radical split as such which can never be reconciled, and which effectuates the inexhaustible impetus behind the attempt to reconcile said split—that gives rise to the *dialectical* development of concrete universality.

Does Unca not represent this very intrinsic antagonism? Her actuality is a "*singular* that raises itself by means of *particularity* to *universality* and makes itself identical with itself" (Hegel 1991: 257). That is to say, universality as "Oneness" is never a perfect whole, it is always intrinsically split, and this split is marked by an innermost antagonism. By these lights, can we not posit the claim that Unca represents this "internal antagonism," especially at "a time when the status of both the European woman and the colonial Other were being debated and inscribed into the discourses of the Enlightenment" (Joseph 2000: 317)? Unca is both reflexive and constitutive of the dominant ideology of her time, presenting her narrative as part of the "cycle of the mediation of [the West's] moments, the cycle through which [the West] posits itself as One." Betty Joseph is therefore partly right in her claim that the imperative of Unca's narrative "to replace [...] is also the impossibility of doing so [thus creating] new spaces and objects." Though these "new spaces and objects" are none other than a sort of gap between a "frame within a frame" from which to view *The Female American* in a new light: that of a text which reinscribes new objects into the universality of Western ideology; Unca's narrative being none other than a foil for doing so.

That *The Female American* is, as Joseph puts it, a "philosophical project of sublation," is self-evident. Joseph writes

the novel imagines a complete release from history because there is no other way this island can survive. By not having "any more to do with Europe" Unca believes the

island can escape colonialism, piracy, the transatlantic slave trade, bonded labor, and all those events that actually stand in the way of the successful proselyte [...] “saving” the natives for Christ by erasing their cultural difference is preferable to preserving English supremacy by exterminating the native through genocidal wars, Unca as missionary cuts across the tradition of ordinary Puritan narratives of nation-building [...] (Joseph 2000: 325)

Because both proselytization and extermination are breeds of the same vicious pedigree, what we have here is a case of Unca resisting European inscription by way of reinscribing a new European order. To reemphasize a point made earlier, Unca, as the female exception, therefore functions as a *point de capiton*, as a “quilting point.” As such, she is simply another colonial pioneer, suturing the elements of the old European order into a new framework: that of a *New England*, as it were! To wit: “Unca’s island will be more of a New England than a radical break with the past and ‘home’” (Joseph 2000: 329). In this sense, is Unca’s narrative not somewhat of a trope for Western expansionism, coinciding with the neurotic and delusive hopes that are concomitant with the founding of *New England*?

In her article, “‘Recollection ... sets my busy imagination to work’; Transatlantic Self-Narration, Performance, and Reception in *The Female American*,” Vaccaro makes the claim that, in virtue of Unca’s “heterogeneous recitations of identity” (i.e., Unca’s performing of sundry roles such as author, narrator, protagonist, historian, spiritual imperialist, wife, etc.), combined with the fact that most of these roles do not align with one another, it subsequently creates a gap between Unca’s character and the narrator (Vaccaro 2008: 133). And according to Felicity Nussbaum, writes Vaccaro, these gaps “characterize the self-writing of women in [18<sup>th</sup> century] England, writing which ventriloquizes dominant ideologies of gender and class while it allows for alternative discourses of experience to erupt in the gaps between subject-positions” (Vaccaro 2008: 133). Vaccaro therefore posits that Unca exploits these gaps in order to critique “culturally-dominant ideologies towards marginalized subject-positions of mixed race and inferior gender” (Vaccaro 2008: 133). But here we should beg to differ. For is it not the case that this very set of radical inconsistencies and antagonisms ascribed to Unca’s character serves moreso as an allusion for the inner antagonisms inherent to the ideological universal of her time? Could it be the case, then, that these internal moments of inconsistency create a gap from which alternative histories can be abstracted out, insofar as these inconsistencies mark the irreducible gap constitutive of the very

ideology they are exception to? That is to say, *these inconsistencies index the very universal they constitute*, a universal that is always-already fractured from within; a fracture that is marked by immanent antagonisms as such. So reasoned, Unca is reflexive and constitutive of the dominant ideology of her time, presenting her narrative as part of the “cycle of the mediation of [the West’s] moments, the cycle through which [the West] posits itself as One.” As such, *it is Unca herself that is ventriloquized*. It is as if the universality of the burgeoning movement of European Enlightenment is speaking through her own narrative, a narrative that depicts the act of sublating the old elements of the European order into a new European framework. (Is Unca's ventriloquial use of the oracle not an apt metaphor for precisely this?)

### **The suture/de-suture process of sublation**

Here, one should recall that, according to Žižek, the point de capiton marks an interconnection of two poles (Žižek 2008, 19-20): not only does the point de capiton effectuate the "de-suturing", i.e., the uprooting of old elements; at the same time it also consummates the movement of these old elements, i.e., their "transpositioning," into a new "sutured" framework.

For example, Unca’s narrative functions as a point de capiton by which the old center of European order is “quilted” into a new framework, mediating a “time when the status of both the European woman and the colonial Other were being debated and inscribed into the discourses of the Enlightenment.” *The Female American* thus reinscribes the universalism of European Enlightenment (the latter divided and haunted by its own inconsistent excesses, e.g., colonialism, slavery, misogyny, etc.) into a new framework. And this new (ideological) framework is constituted by Unca-qua-point-de-capiton. As the exception to the old ways, she gives rise to a new framework, and therefore embodies the very moment when all the old elements get reinscribed into this new framework. As such, Unca stands for the sublation of the old into the new. Thus to think of Unca’s narrative as one which attempts to defy the dominant Western ideology of its time, is to miss a crucial point—that the “ideal of transforming all excluded identifications into inclusive features [...] in appropriating all difference as exemplary features of itself, becomes a figure for imperialism, a figure that installs itself by way of a romantic, insidious, and all-consuming humanism” (Butler 1993: 116). Is this not what Unca’s narrative does? Unca’s narrative merely confirms her image as a “figure for

imperialism.” For it *is* the case that Unca’s narrative attempts to appropriate its differences as moments of itself. And that is the crucial point to keep in mind, should one posit the (erroneous) claim that *The Female American* attempts to defy the dominant Western ideology of its time. At the beginning of Chapter II, Volume II, Unca writes: “is not all nature about thee teeming with subjects well adapted for thy contemplation, happily prepared for thy entertainment?” Is this not a “Hegelian reflection” *par excellence* of Unca’s thought as it is shaped and informed by the universal ideology of her time? Here, Unca is consciously “appropriating all difference as exemplary features of” her own “unary” moment. Such a scene within the narrative only seems reflexive of Unca’s overall embodiment of the paradoxical logic of the exception, which merely sustains the dominant Symbolic space, and readies it for reinscription.

In other words, Unca’s narrative represents “an ordered space whose closure is constantly being traversed by the forces, and worked by the exteriority that it represses: that is, expels and, which amounts to the same, internalizes as one of its moments” (Derrida 1981: 5). In this sense, the function of Unca’s narrative is that of the Derridean “re-mark”; which is none other than the embodiment of the Hegelian moment of sublation; the Lacanian *point de capiton*: Unca’s narrative is the particular exception to the very universal to which it nonetheless gives rise. This particular exception *qua* point de capiton embodies the very structuring principle of the universal order it purports to “resist.” To put it differently, that Unca stands out as an exception to the universal order of the European ideology of her time suggests that, by doing so, she “re-marks” this universal order. That is to say, this universal constantly traverses Unca’s unique situation, in which she is a particular exception to the very universal that she “re-marks” by virtue of her atypical particularity as such. This is precisely how Unca’s narrative is able to sustain the dominant ideology that she otherwise ostensibly appears to resist, thus reinscribing the dominant ideology of her time within her *exceptional* narrative.

The logical conclusion one should draw here, is that, the figure of the Oracle of the Sun is a prime example of how the exception, the point de capiton, functions: As an exception to Christianity, the oracle transforms an entire field of particulars into a totalized, universal order. As such, the oracle functions as a quilting point, opening up a new space and sustaining this open space for the reinscription, i.e., the sublation, of the old imperialist order of male universality (to which *The Female American* appears to be an exception), while simultaneously totalizing the field of indigenous, pagan particulars into this very order. By these lights, the oracle functions in opposition to its own

fundamental proposition—it is highly instrumental in the proselytization of the natives! No less important, this is able to occur by Unca going inside of the oracle, *penetrating* the oracle, in order to achieve dominance over the natives of the island region. Unca thus succeeds in reinscribing the masculine European order of her time, while simultaneously expanding its domain of inscription, metabolizing her own narrative into the ordered space of Western discourse.

As an exception to the order of male universality, Unca is caught within the totalizing logic of male universality; like the constitutive relationship between the oracle and Christianity, she re-marks, and thus reinscribes, the masculine order. This point is further articulated by the fact that she makes a sort of “return to the old” from within the new framework: By the denouement Unca winds up marrying her English cousin and, together, the two of them decide to remain on the island as missionaries. This ending depicts a departure from her English origin, sure, though apparently it is not a complete loss thereof. Together, Unca and her cousin, as missionaries, make one last symbolic gesture of fully subsuming themselves, along with their old elements, in to the new framework; their new island society may not be the *same* as their old English society, though it obviously resembles their old English society in many ways. In this sense, Unca’s narrative is a complete re-marking of the old order within a new framework. What gets subsumed into the Symbolic space of European (masculine) universality is the very exception that existed on its outskirts: the “irrational protuberance”, the “remainder” which did not originally fit; that which ultimately re-marks and reinscribes the universal order: Unca and the “phallicized” field of the feminine-qua-exception that she personified, which includes the indigenous of the island region, too. Thus by the close of the novel we have what appears to be your typical Enlightenment-enriched utopian ending, a hallmark of ideology if there ever was one: The indigenous of the area elude the horrors of extermination and bondage (by way of assimilation), and Unca reconciles her innermost inconsistencies by marrying her cousin, the two of them living happily together with the natives who they have successfully converted into obedient Christians.

### **A not-so-feminist ending**

*In fine*, such a narrative display of feminine agency must be seen in the appearance of its opposite. That Unca reconciles her innermost inconsistencies by marrying her cousin only confirms the male phallic fantasy. Here the message is not: Woman needs man to



be complete; on the contrary, it is: Man needs Woman to be complete. That is to say, this narrative illustrates that it is by dint of male desire that man tailors the female to a desirable image, one that serves to satisfy a lack. In this sense, Unca is reduced to a male-serving role more than anything else; she is "ventriloquized" by the ruling ideology of her time. When Vaccaro points to Unca's "heterogeneous recitations of identity" (i.e., Unca's performing of sundry roles such as author, narrator, protagonist, historian, spiritual imperialist, wife, etc.), does this not confirm that Unca is more so depicted as malleable, as something that can be manipulated to fulfill a role, rather than as being her own stable, pure subject? And is this not fundamental to phallic *jouissance* and the dialectic of male desire?

By the end of the novel, we have Unca and her husband collecting all the gold from the Oracle of the Sun (emblematic of the plundering associated with European colonialism and the imminent emergence of capitalism) before they "blow up the subterranean passage" to the oracle, so that the "Indians might never be tempted to their former idolatry." Here, Unca introduces the maternal role of Symbolic closure, and thereby fulfills the role of ideological totalization. That some claim this novel encourages a feminist challenge to the supreme ideology of its time, as celebrating the diversity of marginalized cultures, seems to be a very misguided and silly claim, one that nearly falls victim to the very same Western fantasy that *The Female American* is couched in. By the end of the novel one is rather convinced that what is being read is a sort of obverted Oedipal narrative, in which a resigned multi-ethnic female ventures into the world of the "savages" to seek out her incestuous romantic interest: a white male (who happens to be her English cousin!); after which the two of them proceed to blow to smithereens, that is, erase from the historical record, all accounts of indigenous particularity (which, by virtue of such a Symbolic act, would presumably include Unca's self-effacement of her own indigenous heritage too), ultimately submitting to the universality of Europe's ruling ideology. In view of this, *The Female American* reads more like a 'pro-assimilation fantasy.' It is thus *not* a story about a female marooned on an island, subsisting on her own, asserting her female autonomy to such an extent that the narrative warrants a feminist critique of the ideological pressures of its day. Rather, it is more a story about Western hegemony, about colonial machismo, and the latter's racist, and sexist, hubris: You *can* climb inside of the indigenous Other and speak its language, even if you are female.

In fine, let us first note that throughout the course of this analysis we have seen that, by means of reading *The Female American* through the lenses of Hegelo-Lacanian-Žižekian theory, we are able to acquire a new appreciation for Žižek's hermeneutics of Hegel's concrete universality à la Lacan's formulae of sexuation. It does not matter whether or not Žižek's rendering of Hegel is "accurate" (according to conventional standards) *insofar* as Žižek's philosophical system, as directly influenced by both Hegel and Lacan, proffers a viable and efficacious theoretical orientation by which we can explore both the worlds we inhabit, and, the worlds we create. That said, by deploying Žižek's philosophy, it is obvious that the adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield, as depicted in *The Female American*, serve to sustain the space of masculine universality, inscribing in that space woman as another "name-of-the-father." That this can be mistaken as an act of feminine resistance to the domineering ideology of its time seems to be a gross misinterpretation. Had Unca truly revolutionized the castaway narrative, had her narrative actually imparted a *genuinely* feminine resistance to Europe's masculist and racist projects of colonialism (e.g., had she allied herself with the indigenous of the area rather than proselytizing them, had she not married her English cousin, had she not effaced the indigenous heritage of the region by setting everything ablaze)—then sure, one would indeed be warranted in their claim that *The Female American* presents a kind of proto-feminist critique of the ideology of its time. That none of this happens, however, that Unca's narrative merely re-marks the projects of early colonial Europe's murderous exploits of merchant theft, expropriation, and proselytization, leaves one pondering over what sort of female we are essentially dealing with here.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: *The Female American or the Extraordinary Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield* ([1767] Vergennes, Vt. Jephthath Shedd, 1814), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps the same as saying: "a signifier is that which represents the subject for another. This signifier will therefore be the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject: that is to say, in the absence of this signifier, all the other signifiers do not represent anything, since something is represented only for something else" (Lacan 1977: 316).

<sup>4</sup> The difference between the Symbolic female and the Real female is perhaps that of two distinct versions of the "non-all." The Symbolic "non-all" (which, arguably, leans heavily on the side of the male) is the set of particulars without exception from which a particular exception emerges as the embodiment of the universal it gives rise to. In this sense, male universality, with its exception, is constitutively dependent on this particularized set of the "non-all." The Real "non-all," however, is the very set of particulars without exception, a (purely feminine) multitude which cannot be

universalized, thereby resisting full inscription into the Symbolic and, as such, represents “nothing”: the *impossible* that is constituted by pure multiplicity and difference; here we have a multitude of particulars existing freely without any universal representation whatsoever.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek writes in *For They Know Not What They Do*, as a response to the oft-cited feminist riposte regarding the “ambiguity of the term ‘man’ as a proof of the ‘male chauvinist’ bias of our everyday language,” that we must look again at the words to grasp how this imbalance between the opposition of male/female leans so heavily on the side of the male; simply that, in so far as man “immediately embodies humankind, man *qua* male is radically, constitutively, more ‘inhuman’ than woman” (Žižek 2008: 45).

<sup>6</sup> See, Slavoj Žižek: <http://www.lacan.com/zizlacan3.htm>

<sup>7</sup> “What the notion of Woman [as such] (or of the primordial father) provides is the mythical starting point of unbridled fullness whose “primordial repression” constitutes the symbolic order” (Žižek, <http://www.lacan.com/zizwoman.htm>).

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