Molly A. Warsh, *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire, 1492-1700*, Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and University of North Carolina Press, 2018, 304 pp. ISBN 9781469638973. \$39.95.

Columbus encountered the rich pearl beds of the Caribbean on his third voyage into the archipelago in 1498. Over the next decades, thousands of pearls flowed from this tropical seabed into European markets, leaving an indelible trace in early modern art. *American Baroque* uses pearls as a heuristic to explore Spanish imperialism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By reconstructing the dynamics of labor and capital on the “Costa de Perlas” along the northern coast of modern-day Venezuela, as well as the tastes and fashions around pearls in European centers, Warsh demonstrates an Iberian, and subsequently a wider European, fascination with pearls as metonym for maritime empire.

American Baroque proceeds chronologically from the moment when Europeans first encountered indigenous communities with long-honed skills for pearl harvesting. Crucially, unlike commodities such as cocoa, pearls were already esteemed as high-value objects by both New and Old-World communities. While we hear relatively little of the indigenous side, Warsh explains that European ideas around pearl wealth derived primarily from the classical source, Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*. This imaginary was abstracted and exotic, envisioned without any specific reference to ecology or harvesting practices—a lacuna that would be (somewhat) clarified over the next two centuries.

In the ensuing decades, private pearling ventures escalated rapidly, centered around makeshift camps known as *racherías de perlas* (pearl settlements) on the islands of Cubagua, Margarita, and Coche. A *quinto*, or fifth of the pearl haul, was paid as tax to the crown. Between 1513 and 1520, fifty pounds of pearls per year flowed from Cubagua to Seville’s *Casa de Contratación* (House of Trade); by 1527, this number stood at six hundred. Over 1.2 billion oysters were likely removed from the seafloor: an “equally stunning, if less obvious, alteration of the submarine ecosystem” as the socio-economic and demographic changes (63). The latter involved a vastly increased demand for labor to work as pearl divers. Europeans initially relied on enslaved indigenous labor from across the region, forcibly moving thousands of persons from Trinidad, Yucatan, and Barbados before turning to enslaved African labor.

From its inception, the regulation of pearling encountered serious obstacles. Pearls were small, displayed immense variability, and were easily secreted away. They were thus constantly “defying efforts at containment,” despite the

best attempts to count, store, standardize or label them. For example, when the Caracas governing council aimed to regulate the use of pearls as specie, they found that “some store keepers and bakers that sell bread will not and do not want to receive pearls [as payment]” while others did, and each made individual judgements about which color, shape, weight, and luster of pearls were sufficient (100-101). Pearls’ material properties thus lent them an “inherent ungovernability” that confounded the interventions of imperial statecraft (253).

These drawbacks in regulation also extended to labor, particularly in the case of skilled divers who worked out of sight, underwater, and who might make a considerable fortune from stolen pearls. This explains the salience of (failed) proposals to use technology such as a dredge to eliminate the reliance on human labor. Despite highlighting the violence of labor at the fisheries, Warsh repeatedly argues for the “dependence of imperial wealth upon the skilled labor of subjects” (147). By this, she refers to the fact that the labor of divers was essential, and that these workers might mutiny or refuse to dive. Yet in the laudable attempt to highlight local expertise, Warsh runs the risk of glossing enslavement, bondage, and violence. When the consequences of desertion or ceasing labor were death or one hundred lashes, specialized, local knowledge appears much less empowering.

The latter half of the book shifts us more definitively into Europe and towards consumption patterns. A key issue Warsh grapples with is the fact that eighty percent of pearl transactions across the Atlantic were private (250). Fragmentary glimpses of these networks come out, for instance, in her close study of the letters received by the customs official of the Spanish port town of Baiona, which show, for instance, various female patrons dealing in pearls. On the American side, of particular interest is Warsh’s use of inquisition trial records to reconstruct pearl ownership in Cartagena and Lima. These demonstrate how a number of women, many of them black, also owned pearls, revealing a network of use beyond European elites.

The closing chapters transition away from the material of the commodity to a consideration of how pearls figured more generally in European art and culture. These sections jump sporadically between Virginia, Surat, the Scottish Highlands, the Netherlands, and Sweden, with an aim of demonstrating the “enduring potency” of pearls linked to ideas of maritime empire (198). This wide-ranging survey (including but not limited to Vermeer’s paintings, English court portraiture, Bohemian woodcuts, and Danish cabinets of curiosities) serves to illustrate that even as pearls faded in value relative to more lucrative commodities, they came to exemplify diversity. Attempts at standardization were replaced by an embrace of alterity and irregularity; Warsh writes that,

“The core challenges that generated the use of the word ‘baroque’ in the pearl fisheries were the core challenges of the era—containing and managing an immensely varied world” (241).

Since they largely elude the panoptic purview of the state, Warsh explains that pearls “come in and out of focus randomly in the historical record” (250). These glimpses—missionary tracts, sunken treasure, stolen booty, valued possessions, subtle iconographies—are mined with considerable skill to link up sites of production with sites of consumption, although the links between the two sides of the Atlantic remain, at times, opaque. *American Baroque* sits alongside other new pearl-centric works on empire: Thomas T. Allsen’s *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire* (Pennsylvania, 2019) or Pedro Machado, Steve Mullins, and Joseph Christensen’s edited volume, *Pearls, People and Power: Pearling and Indian Ocean Worlds* (Ohio, 2020). Pearls, it seems, are in vogue once again.

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