

“Thus might I reason with a heathen...”: The Gothic Moment in *The Female American*

Janina Nordius, University of Gothenburg

Since its re-publication in 2001, after being out of print for almost two centuries, the anonymous novel *The Female American; Or, The Adventure of Unca Eliza Winkfield* (1767) has primarily drawn critical attention as a significant rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).¹ It features a first-person female narrator, supposedly the daughter of a Native American princess and an English colonist (the latter fictitiously claimed to be the son of one of the first settlers of the Virginia colony, Edward Maria Wingfield).² The central part of the novel is set on a desert

¹ Originally published in 1767, *The Female American* was reissued in c. 1800 in Newburyport, MA, and in 1814 in Vergennes, VT. Obviously a popular story, it was, as Robert B. Heilman observes (1937: 70), “unblushingly plagiarized by *The Life and Wonderful Adventures of Henry Lanson* (1800).” More recently, an edition prepared by Michelle Burnham was published by Broadview in 2001. Page references to *The Female American* are to the 2001 edition and are given parenthetically in the text, when necessary for identification preceded by the abbreviation “FA 2001.”— Apart from *Crusoe*, the novel also draws conspicuously on the story of Pocahontas and John Smith, from Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624) as well as other early accounts of colonial North America (see Burnham's Appendix B). The representation of the ruins owes much to the growing archaeological interest in ancient Egypt, as well as to such descriptions of Central and South Amerindian cultures as proliferated in the wake of the Spanish conquest. Figures like the Priests of the Sun that Unca Eliza encounters on the island would also be familiar to English audiences from such dramatic works as William Davenant's opera *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* (1658) and John Dryden's *The Indian Queen* (1664).

² Whether the person who actually wrote the book was male or female, or lived in colonial America or Britain, are questions which remain unanswered (see Burnham's excellent introduction to the 2001 edition, esp. 22, 24). As Burnham observes, Wingfield “was alternately spelled Winkfield” (Burnham 2001: 24); but the historical Edward Maria Wingfield did not have any children (Burnham 2001: 25n1).

2 Janina Nordius

island, supposedly located somewhere off the Virginian coast, where the narrator is treacherously set ashore and abandoned during a voyage to Europe. The recent interest in *The Female American* derives primarily, however, from the fact that it does not simply reproduce unaltered the plot of its famous predecessor; rather, it has been noted for its empowered representation of femininity,³ and it has also been read as “revis[ing] the narratives of capitalist accumulation, colonial conquest, and political imperialism that have been associated with Defoe’s book” (Burnham 2001: 11). Yet as both Michelle Burnham and Betty Joseph observe, despite the narrator’s transnational background and ostensibly more humane approach to the colonial Other than that offered in *Crusoe*, we should not for a moment doubt that this is also a narrative of colonialist appropriation, though operating on a different level from that of its precedent.⁴ This appears not least conspicuously in the episode discussed in this article, an episode where the narrative takes on a clearly gothic tone during a decisive moment in the narrator’s negotiating her own self-image.

My discussion of the gothic moment in *The Female American* should be seen against the background of the novel’s representation of the colonial encounter as a potential source of terror—an assumption that underlies most narratives of colonial gothic. As I have discussed

³ Burnham 2001: 11; Betty Joseph, moreover, notes that *The Female American* “transforms Defoe’s castaway narrative into one of female self-fashioning” (Joseph 2000: 318).

⁴ Joseph discusses the novel as “a critique of colonialism” (Joseph 2000: 318); for although, as she argues, “the novel does not appropriate the island as personal property in the way *Crusoe* did for future settlement by Europeans” (Joseph 2000: 324), the narrator’s “marginality as woman serves, not as a tool to determine a relative autonomy for the native from European history [...], but to transform this native psychically into a subject for Europe” (Joseph 2000: 327). Similarly, as I shall note later in the essay, Burnham claims that the narrator’s “fantasies of a feminist utopianism and cross-racial community [...] are enabled [...] by a specifically religious form of imperialism” (Burnham 2001: 11). In the same vein, Stephen Wolfe claims that rather than rejecting or criticizing “colonialist practices among the Indians,” the text of the novel “presents a colonial/religious refashioning of British hegemony” (Wolfe 2004: 19).

elsewhere,⁵ such narratives tend either to depict the awe and terror experienced by supposedly “civilised” and “modern” European colonists when faced with cultures they construct as backward and barbaric; or, more worryingly, texts of colonial gothic dwell on the atrocities implicit in the colonial subjugation of these so-called barbarous peoples by their allegedly more enlightened European adversaries. In most cases, both strategies are uncomfortably juxtaposed—as is indeed, as we shall see, the case in *The Female American*. The novel introduces us to a heroine-narrator who vacillates between a rationalist and an “irrationalist” construction of self and world as she explores the secret passages and sepulchral vaults that line the narrative of her island experience. Significantly, this discursive tension does not only encode the obvious clash between past and present, but serves ultimately to establish a hierarchy between the parties in the colonial encounter, by ostensibly privileging “modern” European reason and theology, and linking antiquated and disprivileged “superstition” to the colonised Other.

Not surprisingly, then, *The Female American* is introduced by its anonymous “editor” (presumably identical with the author) as “a rational, moral entertainment,” meant to be “both pleasing and instructive” (*FA* 2001: 33). The stress on moral instruction is indeed quite prominent, for though perils constantly threaten the heroine, we are nonetheless asked to believe that whatever might befall her, there is always a providential design behind, and a lesson to be learnt from the ordeal. In this view, it is only logical that the heroine should lapse into uncontrolled terror now and again, only to recover her reason and learn to re-interpret her situation as an opportunity for moral or religious growth. But as I shall argue, although ostensibly given a privileged position in the narrative, this “providential” agenda is on several occasions undermined by an alternative, gothic discourse that, at a crucial moment of religious crisis for the heroine, radically recasts her narrative into a far more complex story of cultural identity-formation.⁶ By exposing the way the heroine

⁵ See, e. g., Nordius 2002, 2005 and 2006.

⁶ For discussions of the conflicted position of the gothic subject, see, e. g., Robert Miles, claiming that “the Gothic is a discursive site [...] for representations of the fragmented subject” (Miles 1993: 4); Toni Wein), arguing that “Gothic plots tremble over the potential loss of their protagonist’s integrity,

4 *Janina Nordius*

tries to repress the pagan side of her Native American cultural heritage in order to emerge as an empowered, Protestant and Anglicised subject under colonialism, this gothic moment effectively anticipates the concern with religion as a cultural marker so prominent in later gothic narratives—whether set in a colonial context or not.

*

As the setting is essential to the heroine-narrator's self-fashioning experience, I shall give a brief outline of its most prominent features. The ruins that cover the island clearly mimic those ancient historical milieus that so fascinated mid- and late eighteenth-century Europe, while at the same time providing an ideal framework for a tale of suspense.⁷ It is perhaps not to be wondered at, therefore, that as the narrator ventures to explore them, we find a quasi-scientific, antiquarian discourse contending in her account with a rhetoric of mystery and awe. She discovers that the ruins are the remnants of an ancient temple devoted to the worship of the sun, and that at their far end is an open place in whose centre stands a large idol, also sacred to the sun. The buildings consist of several hundred rooms, some of which, she tells us, are "surrounded with mummies, like those I have read of in the histories of Egypt, and one of which I once saw in England" (*FA* 2001: 73).⁸ Interpreting the "Indian characters" which she finds on each of them, the narrator concludes "that

an integrity imaged as bundling together the political and social with the private and sexual" (Wein 2002: 12); and Jerrold E. Hogle, declaring that "[t]he Gothic clearly exists, in part, to raise the possibility that all 'abnormalities' we would divorce from ourselves are a part of ourselves, deeply and pervasively (hence frighteningly), even while it provides quasi-antiquated methods to help us place such 'deviations' at a definite, though haunting, distance from us" (Hogle 2002: 12).

⁷ For a survey of European attempts from the mid-eighteenth century to rediscover "the antiquities of the classical world," see Glyn Daniel 1981: 15.

⁸ An anonymous account of "The Antiquities of Egypt," printed in London in c. 1755 includes "an exact Description of some ancient Egyptian Mummies, *that are still to be seen in the Cabinets of the curious* [sic.]" (*An Account of the Antient Egyptians*. c. 1755: xxii), as well as a number of detailed illustrations of mummies.

these had been priests of the sun. Each mummy had on it the name of the priest, his age, and the time of his death; by which I found that most of them had been there at least one thousand years” (74). Other rooms are “filled with stone coffins,” containing the ashes of hundreds of “virgins of the sun, consecrated to the service of the temple” (74).

In part the narrator’s fascination with this sepulchral environment is motivated by the tremendous riches they contain, which add up to a veritable El Dorado. The mummies and the coffins of the sun virgins are decorated with golden ornaments (*FA* 2001: 74-5), and further exploration of the ruins yields more riches still; even the central idol to the sun is made wholly of gold. This idol is a large statue, “resembl[ing] a man clad in a long robe or vest,” though “greatly exceed[ing] human size” (78). The gaze through which it is perceived—or constructed, rather—is that of the experienced eighteenth-century tourist; for as with the graves and mummies, the narrator conveniently provides it with an explanatory legend, as were it an object on display in a museum. “On the back part of the idol,” she tells us, “was written in large Indian characters to this purpose, THE ORACLE OF THE SUN” (78).⁹ As is important for her

⁹ Burnham suggests as a possible model for this idol Thomas Hariot’s description of the “Idol Kiwasa,” in his *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590) (Burnham 2001: 78n2, 178-9). Yet there are also models to be found in fiction. In Penelope Aubin’s *The Noble Slaves* (1722), a European company, stranded somewhere outside Mexico (or possibly Japan; Aubin’s geography is somewhat confused) come across “a ruinous Pagan Temple, in which were several strange Images, the chief of which represented a Man whose Head was adorned with the Rays of the Sun [...] They concluded it to be the Work of some *Chinese* or *Persians*, who had inhabited that Place in antient times.” Through a trapdoor “that went down behind the Altar on which the Image of the Sun was placed,” they “descended by some Stairs, and entered a large Room, where a Lamp was burning before a hideous Image.” From this latter image an obviously supernatural voice informs them, “in *French*,” that it used to be “[a]dored by Pagan *Indians*.” See Aubin 1739: 19-20. From the viewpoint of early colonial gothic, Aubin’s idol is clearly interesting; for not only do many of its characteristics reappear in *The Female American*, but it has also been seen to have much in common with the paraphernalia “later to bedeck the Gothic fiction of Horace Walpole and others” (William H. McBurney 1957: 259). McBurney also points to the resemblance between Aubin’s idol and

subsequent narrative, the statue turns out to be hollow and hence allows her to enter, as she says, “quite into the body of it” (80). It has “holes through the mouth, eyes, nose and ears” (80), through which she can see the whole island, and it moreover functions like a loud-speaker, which makes her voice carry far beyond its normal scope (80).

Yet for all the narrator’s antiquarian rhetoric, her discourse takes on a note more close to the registers of gothic terror fiction when she describes her discovery of a secret underground passage, leading from the ruins to the idol. Stumbling over “a large iron bar” close to the ruins (*FA* 2001: 78), she finds that it is part of “a kind of trapdoor of the same metal,” closed with “two strong bolts” and obviously fallen into disuse long ago (79). As she opens it, she finds “two other bolts to fasten it withinside” (79) and, what is more, “[a] stone staircase,” leading down “under the earth” (79). A dark and “terrifying” passage, “very narrow, capable of admitting only one person to walk abreast” (79), eventually leads on to another flight of “very narrow and steep” stairs that take her up into the idol (80). Still more conventional gothic props are added in the form of a manuscript that the narrator finds in a cell in the ruins, as well as the obligatory hermit who left it there before going off to die in another stone chamber. Besides telling the hermit’s story, the manuscript also warns her of the “savages,” said to come once a year from a nearby island to worship and pay tribute to the idol of the sun (58).

The sense of insecurity the heroine allegedly feels in this unknown place produces its proper share of starts and terrors. Although she tries to maintain her rationalist composure, she complains that “the thought of wandering alone was terrifying” (*FA* 2001: 60); she is seized with “an inexpressible agitation” on first discovering the ruins (57); she “trembl[es]” and hesitates to go on, “fearful to retire, or to enter” (57). “I looked, I stopped, I prayed,” she says, “and then I moved again” (57)—

“Crusoe’s Tartar idol” in Defoe’s 1719 *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (McBurney 1957: 258), which, considering the inspiration from *Robinson Crusoe* found in *The Female American*, might provide another possible intertextual link. Yet in contrast to Aubin, Defoe’s account in *The Further Adventures* three years earlier is utterly rationalist: the Tartar idol is no more than a “scarecrow” block of wood whose narrative function is clearly to put the “stupidity” of its worshippers to shame (Defoe 1895: 281-2).

only to sink down in a swoon as soon she hears “a sudden noise behind [her]” (57). Importantly, however, it is when this discourse of terror is employed to represent Unca Eliza’s relations to the local Amerindians that her narrative begins to engage with issues beyond the merely sensational.

*

The key to this crucial encounter is the heroine’s bicultural background. She is christened Unca Eliza—a name that indicates her double ancestry (the first of these names, “Unca,” is for her Amerindian mother). In possession of a considerable fortune and a royal title inherited from her princess mother, she has been educated in England, staying for several years with her paternal relations; and she significantly uses her familiarity with both parental cultures to construct a hybrid transatlantic identity.

Hence while in England, she flaunts her Native American looks and independence—her “tawny complexion” and “lank black hair” attracting a number of admirers who are, however, kept at arm’s length and made fun of (*FA* 2001: 49-51). She tells her dotting cousin Winkfield, for instance, that she “would never marry any man who could not use a bow and arrow as well as [she] could” (51). But since, as Betty Joseph observes, these “markers of her ethnicity only [heighten] her readability as ‘exotic’ and thus [enhance] her ability to circulate in the highest circles [...]” (Joseph 2000: 329), they never really interfere with her obvious desire to mimic the European and, implicitly, colonialist side of her heritage. For though she profits from her Amerindian background whenever socially convenient, Unca Eliza nonetheless constructs herself to all intents and purposes as a modern, Anglicised and Christian subject.

The cornerstone in the “civilised” identity she thus creates for herself is the Anglican Protestantism she imbibes from her English clergyman uncle, and which she apparently sees as a priori superior to the sun-worshipping religion practised by her own maternal ancestors (*FA* 2001: 38). Importantly for the latter and central part of her narrative, the “Pagan” (41) religion of her mother’s people is also that of the local Amerindians, whose annual visit she has to prepare herself for, having spent some time on the island.

The unknown author of *The Female American* does not fail to exploit the opportunity for suspense that offers in connection with this event. For while the hermit, as emerges from his manuscript, had always taken good care to hide himself in the ruins during the visits by the “savages” (*FA* 2001: 58), Unca Eliza hits on another idea—a plan that, though risky enough, would at the same time give her some bonus points in heaven and, as she hopes, procure her a comfortable life during her exile. This plan is “to ascend into the hollow idol, speak to the Indians from thence, and endeavour to convert them from their idolatry” by pretending to be the oracle (83). (For neither the ancient ruins, nor the hollow design of the idol are, she gathers, known to the Amerindians.) Should this scheme then prove successful, she plans to eventually “discover [her]self” to the Amerindians and “go and live among them” (84).

As is all too well known, however, European missionary efforts to impose Christianity onto non-Christian peoples in other parts of the world served, in most cases, only to open these regions to European cultural and geopolitical domination. This desire to dominate is clearly reflected in the narrator’s discourse when she contemplates her missionary venture. For though she cannot help imagine—in very graphic terms—the awful treatment she would be in for, were her deceit to be discovered,¹⁰ she tries to discard these misgivings by telling herself that “the Indians [...] are generally of a docile disposition” (*FA* 2001: 84) and might thus be easily subdued. “I imagined hundreds of Indians prostrate before me with reverence and attention,” she tells us, “whilst like a law-giver, I uttered precepts, and, like an oracle, inculcated them with a voice magnified almost to the loudness of thunder” (86). And should she ever go and live among them, she continues, it would be crucial to “[keep] them ignorant who I was, or how I came to them, [that]

¹⁰ Momentarily imagining a less felicitous outcome of her preaching venture, the narrator tells us: “my soul shrunk within me at the imagined noise of their dreadful yell; whilst my imagination painted to me an enraged multitude tearing down, in their fury, branches of trees with which to surround the statue, and to burn me in it” (*FA* 2001: 86).

I might preserve a superiority over them, sufficient to keep them in awe, and to excite their obedience" (110).¹¹

But since, as the narrator repeatedly claims, it is precisely the "ignorance" of the "deluded" Amerindians that makes them easy preys to the teachings of the priests of the sun (*FA* 2001: 110), her own exploitation of their ignorance in order to strengthen her position among them is just another step along an already well trodden path. Her project to convert the Amerindians to Christianity becomes, in effect, a project to subjugate them to her own authority and enrich herself at their expense (for in between preaching, she also freely helps herself to the gold in the ruins); it becomes an instance of what Michelle Burnham has called "a specifically religious form of imperialism" (Burnham 2001: 11).

*

Far more important to a discussion of the novel's gothic potential, however, is that the tension between antiquity and modernity suggested by the ruins coincides with the tension between colonised Native American and colonist European implicit in the heroine's hybrid identity. For Unca Eliza's scheme to convert the local Amerindians is at the same time an attempt to validate her modern and enlightened construction of self at the expense of her cultural past. Her crusade against the cult of the sun, a creed so blatantly seen as belonging to a by-gone, pre-Christian and pre-modern order, can thus also be read as a disavowal of those pagan and implicitly "savage" parts of her own heritage that are inimical to her self-image as civilised and Christian subject. Still, her account is at the crucial moment fraught with such unease about her actual religious status that this empowered cultural identity seems seriously threatened. Readers are made to perceive that what is ultimately at stake here is Unca Eliza's never openly acknowledged fear of "going native." The ruins play an active part in staging this scenario; for as I shall discuss

¹¹ Joseph remarks that the narrator's plan to control the Amerindians through religious conversion evokes the missionary activities in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North America by British missionaries belonging to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Joseph 2000: 325-26). See also Wolfe 2004:18, 31-32.

below, the claustrophobic structures of the temple of the sun can, during the heroine's moment of crisis, be seen to metaphorically encode her anxiety about being caught in the role as "heathen" to which her Native American background would seem to consign her.

This singling out of religion as the touchstone of what should count as enlightened modernity or as antiquated superstition is, of course, quite common in gothic fiction; it falls in with what Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall have called "the aggressive Protestantism of early gothic writings" (Baldick and Mighall 2000: 216)—the "idolatry" (*FA* 2001: 83) of the Amerindians here taking the place of Catholicism in traditional gothic. Yet unlike the many anti-Catholic indictments that we find in later gothic, in *The Female American* the narrator's representation of the cult of the sun is condescending rather than hostile. For while she decries the idolatry of the local Amerindians, her missionary agenda obviously requires that they are inherently noble, though primitive—qualities that would make them fit targets for conversion.

The heroine is born and baptised into the Church of England, and her religious education is, as mentioned, supervised by her clergyman uncle in England. So great is the impression made by this uncle's instruction that she internalises his presence and carries it with her on the island. "[I]t was always my custom," she says, "to imagine to myself that my uncle was speaking to me" (*FA* 2001: 69). Hence, it is this "spectralized" uncle (to use Terry Castle's term) who emerges as the ultimate religious authority in the narrative, a dispenser of truths that we are apparently never meant to question.¹²

At first glance, the particular brand of Protestantism that the narrator and her uncle embrace would seem to be a happy mix of reason and revelation, and thus belong more in the eighteenth century than in the 1640s when the story is supposedly set. For to a majority of eighteenth-century Britons, no inherent contradiction was felt to exist between enlightened reason and religious faith; as Roy Porter puts it, "Enlightenment in Britain took place within, rather than against,

¹² See Castle 1987. "One sees in the mind's eye those who are absent; one is befriended and consoled by phantoms of the beloved," Castle says; according to Radcliffe, "such phantasmata [...] are the products of refined sentiment, the characteristic projections of a feeling heart" (Castle 1987: 234).

Protestantism” (Porter 2000: 99). But the narrator’s Protestantism also contains a more Puritan-sounding, authoritarian trait. “Believe and obey,” the imagined uncle admonishes his niece; “Believe, obey, and trust, and be saved, blessed and delivered” (*FA* 2001: 71).¹³

It is to this authoritarian streak in the narrator’s religious makeup that we should attribute her anxiety to be “religiously correct” on all occasions—which in turn, then, has implications for her anglicised cultural identity. As she finds herself alone on the island, the internalised voice of her uncle emphatically tells her not to be impatient with her lot but rather thank God for not being even worse off. “Ah Eliza! would we but compare our sufferings with those of others, where would the wretch be found who would not have something wherewith to console himself?” (*FA* 2001: 70). The passage where her imagined uncle lays down this law of gratitude is revealing of the narrator’s mental anxiety, for it opens by his explicit questioning of her qualifications as a true Christian: “In vain, I find, are the precepts that I so often inculcated on your mind; they have not reached your heart, and, I fear, are erased from your memory” (70). Having thus duly lectured his niece “Eliza” on the virtues of gratitude and complacency, the spectralized uncle significantly switches from her English name “Eliza” to the Amerindian “Unca,” thus foregrounding the “Pagan” (41) side of her background, as he concludes his speech: “Thus might I reason with a heathen, and I think, not without success. But is not Unca a christian, or would be such?” (70). The implication is, of course, that unless “Unca” keeps strictly within the pale of her uncle’s precepts, she is no better than a “heathen”—*would-be* Christian though she may fashion herself. Needless to say, since this lecture is said to take place in the narrator’s imagination, the misgivings of her phantom uncle ought, of course, really be seen to reflect her own unease about her Christian persona. Hence her anxiously defensive comments as she continues exploring her own religious beliefs: “Surely this was not superstition [...]!” (84).

¹³ This trait seems peculiarly at odds with the enlightened combination of reason and revelation just mentioned. For, as Porter writes, “Enlightened minds ceased to equate religion with a body of commandments, graven in stone, dispensed through Scripture, accepted on faith and policed by the Church” (Porter 2000: 99).

These, then, are the worries that constitute the subtext of the pivotal scene where the narrator goes to hide in the statue, on the night before the Amerindians are expected. In terms of gothic representation, this scene anticipates later gothic tales where, as Fred Botting observes, “the gloom and darkness” of the setting become “external markers of inner mental and emotional states” (Botting 1996: 91-92). For when the narrator enters the subterranean passage leading to the statue, she is surprised by a combined hurricane and earthquake; she loses her light and is left trapped in the dark (*FA* 2001: 87).¹⁴ Conspicuously using what was soon to become a favourite gothic trope, she repeatedly shudders at the prospect of being “buried alive” among the structures that uphold the religious tradition of her pagan forebears (87, 88). She tries sitting in the statue but is afraid of being “swallowed up” by the earthquake, or of “the statue [...] overturn[ing] with [her]self in it” (87); and retiring again to the underground passage, she is all but defeated by “the agony of [her] mind,” lamenting, “I concluded myself lost, that I was entombed alive [...]” (88).

I would argue that the narrator’s fear of being buried alive in the heart of paganism, as it were, translates itself here into a gothic metaphor encoding her anxiety about her Christian identity. From having initially regarded her missionary plans as sanctioned by providence, she now begins to see them in the light of such cardinal vices as pride and presumption—hence totally at odds with the complacency-and-gratitude script propagated by her phantom uncle. For, as we remember, her aim in preaching to the Amerindians was not only to do good, but also to achieve “a much happier life” among these hopefully “docile” people, should she eventually decide to go and live with them (*FA* 2001: 84). But now she upbraids herself: “Could the poor hermit content himself forty years in his lonely cell, and was I so soon weary of it?” (89). Having thus

¹⁴ The author of *The Female American* has obviously borrowed the idea of the earthquake from *Robinson Crusoe* (see Defoe 1985: 96-8). But though Crusoe, too, expresses his fears that he might be buried alive, the religious and cultural implications that this threat carries in *The Female American* are lacking in Defoe’s novel. Instead of being seized with religious qualms, Crusoe worries about “[his] tent and all [his] household [sic.] goods,” thoughts which, he says, “sunk my very soul within me” (Defoe 1985: 96).

failed, as she believes, to abide by her uncle's law of gratitude, she gives herself up for lost, lamenting: "All the favours of providence are now lost upon me. I might have lived with some degree of comfort, but now must perish miserably. I have by my rashness sinned against the mercy of heaven, and now must die without it" (89). Being thus forever consigned to the realms of the heathen, as she thinks, this means of course, too, that she would also have to resign her supposed cultural superiority over the Amerindians, which was so intimately connected with her Christian identity.

This scene of self-disintegration and threatening live burial can thus be said to constitute a truly gothic moment in *The Female American*. Yet in a narrative that, for all its crucial alterations, is still so obviously based on the story of the enterprising Crusoe, it would perhaps be asking too much if the heroine should not try to capitalise on whatever means are available to her in this dismal plight, notably her ethnic hybridity. Hence, believing herself rejected by the Christian God, and consequently facing the loss of her empowering identity as a Christian, she tries momentarily to make the best of her situation by shifting her allegiances and indulging the Amerindian side of her background—hoping in this way at least to save her skin if not her Christian soul. As she "most ardently wishe[s] for the coming of the Indians, who happily might prove the instruments of [her] deliverance" (*FA* 2001: 89), she trusts that her "complexion and the advantage of speaking their language [...] would recommend [her] to their favour" (88). Such desperate clutching at straws can hardly be said to detract from the gothic terror evinced in this scene, however; if anything, it rather reinforces it.

*

The incarceration scene constitutes the pivotal episode in *The Female American*, but once this crucial moment of self-renegotiation has passed, the narrator abandons her gothic rhetoric and returns to the would-be rationalist discourse previously used to express her belief in a providential design. Thus, she tells us, her near live-burial experience is in fact revealed to be just another proof of the benevolence of providence; for had she *not* been confined underground, she would most likely have been killed by falling debris from the ruins (*FA* 2001: 90). Encouraged by this conclusion and hence once more convinced that she

has God on her side, Unca Eliza goes ahead with her plan to teach Christianity to the Amerindians from the idol, and in due time announces that a “holy” woman shall be sent to live among them for their further instruction (111). This way she establishes herself among them for the rest of the story as someone who is “more than a mere mortal” (119), and constantly “attended,” as she says, “by a whole nation, all ready to serve me” (118).

However, no eighteenth-century narrative aspiring to the epithet of “rational, moral entertainment” (*FA* 2001: 33)—even when leaning so outspokenly on providential authority as *The Female American*—would be complete if its final resolution were not anchored in a concomitant discussion aimed to achieve a proper sense of balance. Therefore, once the narrator has made her “dear Indians” (137), as she now calls them, acknowledge her intrinsic superiority and lay aside their native “idolatry” in favour of her own European Christianity, she proceeds to chide her fellow-Europeans for failing to live up to the refined morality taught by her uncle. At the end of the novel, the narrator attempts to dissociate herself from old-world corruption and prejudice as effectively as she believes she has already done from the heathen primitivism of the Amerindians. She refuses to return to Europe when opportunity offers, and she vehemently condemns the slave trade and the crude superstition displayed by the sailors accompanying her English cousin eventually come to rescue her (121-23); instead she plans to create for herself an ideal community of the kind that European imaginations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries so often hoped to find in America.¹⁵

As must be obvious, though, at least to a reader prepared to read against the grain, this rejection of old-world vice and superstition is as fraught with mixed discourses as ever the narrator’s earlier account of her missionary project. That in her castigation of English superstition there should enter a strong class bias, markedly singling out lower-class Britons for scorn, is perhaps only to be expected in a narrative where the capacity for enlightened reason is made a correlative of social and cultural power. But, more glaringly, her denunciation of the slave trade,

¹⁵ The agendas for such communities varied, from the Plymouth Colony in the early 1600s to the pantisocracy planned by Coleridge and Southey on the Susquehanna in the 1790s.

and her worries, on first sighting the approaching English party, that “the poor Indians” might “be taken for slaves” and “their country [...] invaded” (*FA* 2001: 121), are equally compromised by the fact that she herself had always been a slave-owner, prior to being marooned on the island (49, 53-5).¹⁶

Yet even more disturbing for the outcome of her story is the ironic circumstance that, despite her exceptional elevation to the status of supreme Christian prophetess, Unca Eliza never quite achieves the dissociation from her cultural past she is aiming for. For the success of her missionary project, and implicitly also the self-image she creates, rest on a very slippery foundation. What validates the modern Christian regime she establishes is ultimately neither Christ nor her own persuasiveness, but the authority lent to her teachings by the heathen oracle whose voice she borrows. Thus, a reading open to the symbolic significance of the pagan setting, so evident in the incarceration scene, will effectively undermine the rationalising discourse of Christian providence seemingly privileged by the narrative; for it shows how the uncomfortable shadow of the past—the religious tradition of her ancestors that the narrator so passionately rejects—nonetheless continues to haunt her would-be successful story of Christian hegemony and colonial power.

As I hope to have shown, the gothic elements in *The Female American* recast the novel into a far more complex story than what first meets the eye. Ostensibly complying with the prevailing taste that saw moral instruction as the main *raison d'être* for novels, the narrative nonetheless stretches its license to “entertain” beyond this didactic purpose in order to probe such recesses of terror—both within and without the human mind—as would soon become the primary locus of gothic. The intervention of a gothic discourse is particularly noticeable in the way the novel engages with colonial identities. Far from taking such identities for granted, the narrative presents the heroine-narrator’s negotiation of the various strands in her cross-cultural and biracial background as its chief and most troubling site of terror. In thus addressing a problematic that in various forms would continue to haunt

¹⁶ Cf. Burnham 2001: 20.

the post-colonial experience, *The Female American* remains an important text for gothicism today.

References

- An Account of the Antient Egyptians; [...] Their Manner of treating dead Bodies; Method of Embalming; and particular Way of trying and judging Persons after their Death. With seven large and curious Cuts of Egyptian Mummies, exactly drawn, with their Hieroglyphic Characters, interpreted and explained.* c. 1755. Prefixed to *The History of the Life and Actions of Alexander the Great [...]*. Translated from the French of Monsieur de Vaugelas. London: M. Cooper, W. Reeve, and C. Sympson.
- Aubin, Penelope. 1739. *The Noble Slaves*. 1722. Rpt. in Penelope Aubin, *A Collection of Entertaining Histories and Novels, Designed to promote the Cause of Virtue and Honour, Principally founded on Facts, and interspersed with a Variety of beautiful and instructive Incidents*. Vol.1. London: D. M. Midwinter, A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, J. and J. Pemberton, R. Ware, C. Rivington, A. Ward, J. and P. Knapton, T. Longman, R. Hett, S. Austen, and J. Wood.
- Baldick, Chris and Robert Mighall. 2000. "Gothic Criticism." *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed. David Punter. Oxford: Blackwell. 209-228.
- Botting, Fred. 1996. *Gothic*. London: Routledge.
- Burnham, Michelle. 2001. Introduction. *The Female American; Or, The Adventure of Unca Eliza Winkfield. Compiled by Herself*. Ed. Michelle Burnham. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press. 9-28.
- Castle, Terry. 1987. "The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*." *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory: Politics: English Literature*. Ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown. New York: Methuen. 231-253, 307-310.
- Daniel, Glyn. 1981. *A Short History of Archaeology*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Davenant, William. 1658. *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru. Exprest by Instrumentall and Vocall Musick, and by Art of Perspective in Scenes, &c.* London: Henry Herringman.

- Defoe, Daniel. 1895. *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. Rpt. in Daniel Defoe, *Romances and Narratives*. Ed. George A. Aitken. Vol. 2. London: Dent.
- Defoe, Daniel. 1985. *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. Rpt Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dryden, John and Robert Howard. 1664. *The Indian Queen*. London.
- The Female American; Or, The Adventure of Unca Eliza Winkfield. Compiled by Herself*. 2001. 2 vols. London: Francis Noble, John Noble, 1767. New ed. Ed. Michelle Burnham. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.
- Hariot, Thomas. 2003. *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. 1590. Gutenberg: Etext 4247. Available: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/8nflv10.txt>. 18 July, 2008.
- Heilman, Robert B. 1937. *America in English Fiction 1760-1800: The Influences of the American Revolution*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. 2002. Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1-20.
- Joseph, Betty. 2000. "Re(playing) Crusoe/Pocahontas: Circum-Atlantic Stagings in *The Female American*." *Criticism* 42.3: 317-335.
- The Life and Adventures of Henry Lanson*. c.1800. London.
- McBurney, William H. 1957. "Mrs. Penelope Aubin and the Early Eighteenth-Century English Novel," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 20.3: 245-267.
- Miles, Robert. 1993. *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy*. London: Routledge.
- Nordius, Janina. 2002. "A Tale of Other Places: Sophia Lee's *The Recess* and Colonial Gothic." *Studies in the Novel* 34.2: 162-76.
- . 2005. "'A Kind of Living Death': Gothicizing the Colonial Encounter in Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House*." *English Studies* 86.1: 40-50.
- . 2006. "Racism and Radicalism in Jamaican Gothic: Cynric R. Williams's *Hamel, the Obeah Man*," *ELH* 73: 673-93.
- Porter, Roy. 2000. *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*. London: Penguin.

- Smith, John. 1995. *Generall Historie of Virginia*. 1624. Excerpt rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Shorter 4th ed. New York: W. W. Norton. 60-69.
- Wein, Toni. 2002. *British Identities, Heroic Nationalisms, and the Gothic Novel, 1764-1824*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Wolfe, Stephen. 2004. "Unifying Misnomers: Unca Eliza Winkfield's *The Female American*." *American Studies in Scandinavia* 36.2: 17-34.