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Bhumika Choudhary
Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut

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Evaluating the Use of the Novel Genre in Unca Eliza Winkfield's *The Female American* to Undo Transgressions of Gender Boundaries and Christian Imperialism

The Female American is a unique early American novel that portrays an autonomous, biracial female protagonist who uses her mixed ethnic status to transgress gender boundaries. The text was originally published in 1767 but was overlooked until twenty-first-century scholars recognized how the text complicates traditional definitions of the novel genre to critique representations of women and Christian imperialism. The text fulfils the purpose of the novel genre as defined in Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, enabling a renegotiation of gender boundaries. However, the text adapts realism to enter a political critique on Christian imperialism and disrupts the defining characteristic of the novel genre according to Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. The application to the above listed books show why early American novels like *The Female American* demand attention, but Davidson and Watt fail to recognize how the novel form engages and departs from traditional castaway narratives to create a "third space."ⁱ In this essay, I focus on how the disruption of the traditional definitions of the novel genre leads to the creation of a "third space" that undoes the transgressions of gender boundaries, making the text a fantasy of unrestricted female freedom.

Fulfilment of Purpose of the Novel Genre Enables Gender Transgressions

Davidson defines the study of the early American novel by tracing the origins of American fiction from 1789 to 1820, starting roughly twenty-two years after the publication of *The Female American*. She evaluates the changing literacy patterns of men and women by tracing the economics of book production, distribution, and consumption. Davidson develops

an understanding of the purpose of the novel genre by using traditional literary history, that is, the historical, social, and educational backgrounds of early American society (Lemay 415). Davidson establishes the purpose of the novel as educational in nature, specifically for women, and *The Female American* fulfills the intention of the novel genre fully to present a social commentary on the representations of women.

The Female American adopts Davidson's understanding of the purpose of the novel genre to present a radical alternative to novelistic representations of women as passive (Winkfield 14). A novel in Davidson's opinion speaks to "those not included in the established power structures of the Republic and welcomed into the republic of letters citizens who had previously been invited, implicitly and explicitly, to stay out" (Davidson 79). Furthermore, the central character and narrator of the text is a wealthy biracial woman who historically was nonetheless excluded from "the established power structures of the Republic" (Davidson 79). The purposeful choice to have a racially mixed female protagonist takes authority from the patriarchy and gives it to the vulnerable, interpretive population of women, thus, the text transgresses gender boundaries since the women in the text are not victims of patriarchal authority and poverty (Winkfield 11 and 15).

Davidson argues that the novel became a form of education for women and allowed a "means of entry into a larger literary and intellectual world and a means of access to social and political events from which readers (particularly women) would have been otherwise excluded from" (10). The narrator likewise establishes from the onset that the text's purpose is to show that women can also "experience greater vicissitudes, many times wonderful and strange" like men (Winkfield 45). For example, Unca's mother experiences an English invasion during which she exerts agency by rescuing a white man (Winkfield 49).ⁱⁱ Unca's mother participates in transgressive acts and adventures, which is in stark contrast to the lives of most English women that were characterized as "commonly domestick" (Winkfield 45).

The Female American enables these transgressive acts by giving the female characters like Unca's mother access to social and political eventsⁱⁱⁱ that women were typically excluded from.

The Female American cleverly adopts conventions of the novel genre as defined by Davidson, specifically the novel as a form of education, to present a heroine who transgresses gender boundaries. The novel introduces to the reader, mostly women "new subjects, new vocabulary, a new range of experiences as well as information on topics as diverse as international diplomacy or comparative religion" (Davidson 72). The biracial and multilingual protagonist educates the Indians (a group excluded from established power structures) about Christianity (Winkfield 104). Unca educates the Indians and indirectly readers on "comparative religion" that motivates members of the Indian community to get baptized^{iv} (Winkfield 149). In addition, Unca declines the proposition of solely sharing her knowledge with the high priests, highlighting the novel's constant attempt at transgressing gender boundaries (Winkfield 114). The text's adoption of Davidson's understanding of the novel genre encourages resistance to gendered expectations while revealing the value of improved education for women.

The Female American becomes a form of education through its subtle commentary on the value of literacy for women and this aligns with Davidson's claim on gender. The anonymous writer of the text hints at the value of improved education through Unca's literacy, which helped her survive on the island. Davidson claims:

"virtually every American novel written before 1820 (I can think of no exceptions) at some point includes either a discourse on the necessity of improved education...at the very least, a comment on the educational levels and reading habits of the hero and even more so the heroine" (66).

The Female American mentions that Unca received the same level of education as a man, specifically the uncle's son, therefore, a comment is made on the educational level more so

on Unca than John Winkfield Jr. (Winkfield 58 – 59). Moreover, Unca’s reading habits facilitate her survival on the island because she is able to read the hermit’s manuscript (Winkfield 67). Constantly, the text enforces Davidson’s claim that novels initiate a “discourse on the necessity of improved education” and this represents a radical alternative to the passive representations of women.

The *Female American* renegotiates gender boundaries while reinforcing unrestricted female freedom as a fantasy (Winkfield 24). Davidson’s study on traditional literacy history revealed that “women, after all, had no legal status and so, since their signature proved nothing” (59). For example, the wealth that belonged to Unca’s mother is transferred to England since it is inherited by Unca’s father, an English settler (Winkfield 62). The enforcement on fantasies of a female utopianism aligns with Davidson’s understanding of the upcoming novel genre as, “although early novels advanced their own definition of realism, a number of them ended as wish-fulfillments” (Winkfield 12 and Davidson 52). Thus, Unca resigns to the traditional marriage plot by accepting John Winkfield Jr. as her husband^v (Winkfield 24 and 149). *The Female American* uses the purpose of the novel genre, as defined by Davidson, to fulfill a larger cultural goal of representing and educating the minority, specifically women.

Adapting Realism to Critique Christian Imperialism

If Davidson claims female agency as the intent of the novel genre, another scholar Ian Watt, argues realism is the central feature that distinguishes the novel genre. *The Female American* disrupts Watt’s defining characteristic of the novel genre, realism, to initiate a political commentary on Christian imperialism. Watt defines realism in early eighteenth-century novels as “the pursuit of truth that is conceived in a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought, and more likely to be arrived at by a departure from it (9 – 10 and 13). The anonymous writer of *The Female American* disrupts

the definition of literary realism partially due to the conscious choice of departing from traditional plots.

The anonymous author uses Unca's individual experiences to pursue the truth by using the narrative method of providing extensive details of the human experience. According to Watt, a novel must provide a "full and authentic report of human experience and is therefore under obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of actors is concerned" (32). The text similarly develops an authentic report of Unca's lived experiences as an autonomous and mobile woman by providing details on the time and place of Unca's experience(s). The narrator presents readers with the detail of why she declines John Winkfield Jr.'s marriage proposal for instance: "I would never marry any man who could not use a bow and arrow as well as I could" (Winkfield 60). Additionally, her experiences on the island help Unca towards the pursuit of truth, specifically "the important business of an apostle" (Winkfield 126). The adaptation of literary realism allows the text to have a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in a temporal and spatial environment than other literary forms (Watt 32).

However, the anonymous writer plays with the most important characteristic of realism – departure from traditional plots. According to Watt, originality and plot detachment from mythology, history, legend, or previous literature are key in differentiating novels from other literary genres (14). This is disrupted by *The Female American* with its use of castaway narratives like *Robinson Crusoe* to develop the plot of the narrative. The text does not "break with the earlier literary tradition of using timeless stories to mirror the unchanging moral verities" (Watt 22). Many eighteenth-century critiques have studied the plot similarities between the text and *Robinson Crusoe*. A significant similarity between the two characters is "Like Crusoe, Winkfield vacillates between doubt and conviction and gains respect and influence through her religious instructions to the Indians" (Winkfield 23). Furthermore, the

anonymous writer borrows lived experiences from historical figures such as Pocahontas and William Winkfield. For example, the origins of Unca's mother and William Winkfield's relationship echoes the way Pocahontas and John Smith met. The second edition of the text also reveals "a great deal about the literary and historical sources he or she may have used to fashion the novel" (Winkfield 27). The text introduces a commentary on Christian imperialism by using historical and fictional captive narratives.

The critique on Christian imperialism causes a disruption in the purpose of a novel genre, because the marriage to John Winkfield Jr. transforms Unca into a passive female heroine that embodies imperialism. The narrative voice shifts from "I" to "we" in the last chapters with the arrival of John Winkfield Jr. who takes Unca's narrative agency^{vi} (Winkfield 162 and 24). The erosion of the protagonist's authority hinders the novel's purpose to speak to citizens instructed to stay out from the power structures of the Republic (Davidson 79). In my opinion, the text then represents the classic eighteenth century domestic woman, instead of a woman who breaks gendered social standards, as readers are led to believe would happen.

The disruption of the characteristic of the novel genre allows the anonymous writer to use historical and literary antecedents from the Old and the New World to narrate a timeless story of a biracial and multilingual woman resisting the socially defined role of femininity while embodying imperialism (Winkfield 12). Thus, "the freedom and power that she experiences is largely legitimized by the novel's religious imperialism and its use of strategic narrative devices" (Winkfield 27). It is intriguing how the text fulfills the purpose of the novel despite playing with the conventions of the form at a time when the traditional definitions of the genre were still undefined.

***The Female American* Creates a Third Space Undoing the Transgressions**

Watt and Davidson define the novel genre, which *The Female American* adopts and adapts to critique representations of women. However, the introduction of castaway narratives complicates the transgressions of gender boundaries because Unca becomes an embodiment of Christian imperialism. I argue that *The Female American* adapts realism to engage and depart from castaway narratives in a way that creates a “third space,” where Unca embodies Christian imperialism and becomes a representation of the female fantasy of limitless freedom.

The Female American engages with castaway narratives like *Robinson Crusoe* to renegotiate the traditional definitions of the novel genre. The text imitates the castaway narrative, disrupting the expectation of realism to depart from traditional plots. This is reflected by the similarities between the titles of *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Female American*. One is *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and the other is *The Female American, or the Extraordinary Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield*. The phrasing and imitation of the word choice “adventure” establishes that the anonymous writer intentionally complicates Watt’s and Davidson’s understanding on the conventions of the novel genre. Moreover, certain events such as Crusoe being visited by Cannibals is borrowed and replaced by Unca being visited by the Indians,^{vii} proving the failure of the text to detach itself from traditional plots (Winkfield 67 and McDowell 309).^{viii}

In fact, the text departs from castaway narratives significantly by reporting the narrative from a feminine perspective. This claim is supported in Joseph Betty’s “Re(Playing) Crusoe/Pocahontas: Circum-Atlantic Stagings in ‘The Female American’” that states, “[*The Female American*] replaces the original through a complex process of surrogation, rendered all the more complex because it transforms Defoe’s castaway narrative into one of female

self-fashioning and into a critique of colonialism at the same time” (318). The transformation of Defoe’s castaway narrative proves my argument that *The Female American* uses castaway narratives to comment on the female fantasy of freedom.

Unca is originally portrayed as an anonymous woman who exerts agency through her self-proclaimed role of deity to the Indians.^{ix} However, the text falls short because it begins to practice narrative ventriloquism^x beginning in Chapter X, Unca’s voice is dislocated and shifts to male figures like John Winkfield Jr. who are invested in social and religious authority (Winkfield 24). For example, emphasis is placed on the male figure as seen in “**My husband** and I spent much of our time in teaching the Christian religion to the children...and **his** preaching twice a week, **we** had greatly the appearance of a Christian country” (Winkfield 149). The words in bold show the complete dislocation of Unca’s voice, proving the text’s failure to fully resist the passive representations of women. Edward Stevens also makes this point, writing, “more often than not, it seems, though, that novelists scrutinized but did not seriously challenge existing social relations defined by gender” (694). The novel becomes a wish fulfillment with the introduction of Christian imperialism, complicating the tensions between transgressing and respecting gender boundaries.

The Female American engages with traditional plots of castaway and historical narratives to initiate a political commentary on Christian imperialism that reflects Europeans’ representational apparatus of the inferior Indian population. For instance, Unca’s exterior description is rooted in European taste with the repetitive motif of “diamonds” and this can be compared with Simon van de Passe’s *Matoaka as Rebecca*. The portrait fulfills the English fantasy by enclosing Pocahontas’ status of an Indian woman and similarly, the motif of “diamonds” reminds readers of the English restricting Unca’s Indian identity. The political commentary on Christian imperialism shows how the English conceal “colonialist violence by troping a native name with that of a founding father” (Joseph 322). Moreover, the union of

Unca's parents reflects the tale of Pocahontas who was viewed as a symbol of diplomacy between the English and Indians. The use of historical stories helps readers "imagine a postcolonial Atlantic that does parcel out literary texts, bodies, practices, and historical events into the neatly-agreed on division of Pocahontas at Gravesend" (Joseph 333).

The Female American integrates stories from both the Old and New World to critique the English fantasy of imperialism. The English fantasy is enforced through Unca and her husband teaching Christianity to the Indians who then baptize and abandon their culture^{xi} (Winkfield 149). Colonialism thrived on the complete erasure of the minority culture to preserve English supremacy (Joseph 325). The engagement and departure from the traditional definitions of the novel genre creates a narrative that is a fantasy of feminist utopianism and cross-racial community, both which are enabled by a religious form of imperialism (Winkfield 12).

The Female American pushes literary boundaries through its reliance on past narratives to create a "third space"¹ where the institutions of gender and imperialism are questioned. The hybrid nature of the protagonist is translated into the hybridity of the text itself, which combines a majority and minority population to create a "third space." Joseph elaborates on the significance of the "third space,"

Unca's text which we are reading is thus neither the last English novel nor the first American novel but rather a story of the founding of a third space: an imagined community, where the founding father has been displaced by the not-quite-white mother, and where Christianity becomes a female fantasy of total being that rescues the native population from the history of Anglo founding and Anglo (male) missionary projects (Joseph 326).

Unca finds a "third space" by interacting with the Indians, which is contrary to the hermit's instructions in the manuscript and likewise, the text finds a "third space" through Unca's

communications with the Indian community. The text becomes unique due to the “third space” that facilitates the anonymous writer to introduce the South American Indian into the North American novel while writing the first close imitation of any English novelist (McDowell 309). The anonymous writer negotiates the boundaries of gender and imperialism simultaneously as reflected in Unca’s agency of rescuing the native population, which defies her prescribed role of domesticity. Here, the text becomes complicated because her teachings on Christianity makes her an embodiment of imperialism, which captures her in a male dominated institution.

The presence of constant tension between transgressing and respecting the established boundaries on gender and imperialism is evident throughout *The Female American*. Unca initially embraces female liberation, except she is also constrained by the cultural, political, religious, and sexual discourse (Joseph 326). For example, Unca is viewed as an authority figure by the Indians; yet she respects her religious and sexual discourse by marrying John Winkfield Jr. according to Indian customs to keep the Indians satisfied (Winkfield 149). In addition, she rescues the spirits of the Indians through religious teachings that makes the Indians captives of history (Joseph 327). The Indians becomes victims and slaves of Christian imperialism as reflected through their choice to willingly baptize and their complete submission to European curiosities (Winkfield 148 – 149). As Joseph puts it, these tensions make *The Female American* “join a new community of texts that remain in the liminal spaces between national boundaries or that represent the unassimilated space within national narratives” (Joseph 320). Thus, *The Female American* engages and departs from the castaway narrative in a way to highlight how Christian imperialism not only erases the self-worth of the inferior community (Indians), but also erodes the agency that Unca once possessed. It is this disruption that makes the text unique, creating a “third space” exclusively for itself.

The Female American deserves recognition for presenting a narrative that plays with the traditional definitions of the novel genre as defined by Davidson and Watt to allow a minority (biracial woman) to become the primary interpreter of American culture. The anonymous writer's choice to introduce castaway narratives further complicates Davidson's and Watt's study on the form of the novel genre. The adaptation of traditional plots reflects the realities of womanhood; specifically, women as vehicles for men to maintain their social and religious power. The introduction of Christian imperialism undoes the agency and autonomy that Unca initially embodies, leading to *The Female American* innovating a "third space." The disruption of the novel definitions is significant because the anonymous writer does that before Davidson and Watt shape the field, and twenty-first century critiques recognize the role of castaway narratives in complicating the relationship between the purpose and conventions of the novel genre.

END NOTES

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- ⁱ The term “third space” is coined by Betty Joseph in *Re(playing) Crusoe/Pocahontas: Circum-Atlantic Stagings* in “The Female American.”
- ⁱⁱ This scene is similar to Pocahontas taking Captain Smith in her arms, which saved him from death.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Female American is accessing a variety of socio-political events such as the success of the first plantation in 1607 and the 1622 massacre of English colonists at Jamestown (Winkfield 14).
- ^{iv} This scene is a direct historical reference to the baptism of Pocahontas in 1613 or early 1614.
- ^v Unca’s submission to the traditional marriage plot aligns with Davidson’s claim on sentimental novels that represent the relationship between men and women, which is characterized as domination and submission (Davidson 117).
- ^{vi} Unca’s agency like Pocahontas is taken away by a man because John Smith narrates the story of Pocahontas.
- ^{vii} The textual evidence of the visit by the Indians is “...found that it was yet two months to the time of the Indians coming on this island” (Winkfield 67).
- ^{viii} These imitations cause critics like McDowell to claim, “incidents recounted in *The Female American* are so preposterous that the book has little intrinsic worth” (309).
- ^{ix} This scene shows Unca’s ability to exert agency, “Our countrymen rejoiced to hear the good news, and all desire you will come and live among them; they will love you, obey all your commands, and will make you their queen, for our king is lately dead, and as he had no children, we have not as yet chosen a new king” (Winkfield 123).
- ^x Narrative Ventriloquism dislocates the voice of the heroine from her body and makes it seem as if that voice — while clearly identified as hers — is nevertheless issuing from the lips of male figures who are invested with social and religious authority (Winkfield 24).
- ^{xi} The baptism of the Indians is a direct reference to the baptism of Pocahontas in 1613 or early 1614.

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