It seems safe to say that the predominant association of the word “baroque” is not with pearls. The baroque is a familiar term as a descriptor of artistic expression, certainly, with established literatures on its relevance in art, literature, architecture, and music, but the relationship between these disparate fields, the complex and evolving import of the concept within them, and the word’s origin and utility as an early modern descriptor of irregular pearls is less common. And with good reason, perhaps: as the eminent Spanish historian John Elliott wrote his review of José Antonio Maravall’s classic work on the baroque as historical concept, “It is hard enough to find common denominators in the infinitely complex and varied Europe of the seventeenth century, and harder still to make convincing connections between the aesthetic and literary sensibility of an age and its political and social organization.”

And yet, there is much to be gained from a consideration of baroque pearls and their particular history and utility in modes of early modern material expression. This chapter seeks to remind us that the baroque was, once, a very specific thing, not just the complex aesthetic concept that it is today. Baroque pearls’ identity as the most outlandish iteration of the natural, maritime jewel—whose variety and profusion in the Americas provoked transformative experiments in wealth management in the early sixteenth century as the Spanish crown grappled with the challenges of a nascent Atlantic empire—enabled material explorations of the wonders of the world. The history of the products and lessons of the American pearl fisheries grounds lyrical meditations on the baroque in

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1 An exception is Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, eds., *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham, N.C., 2010.)
2 J.H. Elliott, “Concerto Barroco”, *New York Review of Books*, April 9, 1987. Antonio Maravall argued that the baroque was a historical structure that was international in nature. See José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis, Minn., 1986.).
lived experiences of chaos and creation, of destruction and innovation. The explosion of American pearls in the early sixteenth century prompted the imperial impulse to control and order as well as its defiance. Baroque jewels embody these dueling impulses—they are celebrations of the outlandish and uncontrolled in nature as well as of the independent imagination of the artisan, even as they also stand as a tribute to the early modern drive to contain irregularity, first within a jewel, and then once more as a part of the collections of Kunst- and Wunderkammer.

Pearls, as I argue in the book from which this chapter emerges, prefigured the central conceptual problem of the American encounter: trying to categorize and control of unfamiliar subjects and objects and places. My own conclusions about the relevance of the concept of the baroque for the history of the Americas echoes that of numerous theorists and literary scholars. The complex history of pearl cultivation, circulation and use in and beyond the Venezuelan pearl fisheries calls to mind Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría’s assertion “through its copiousness and proliferation, the Baroque inscribed the American.”

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3 This article draws on material discussed more fully in my book American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire 1492-1700 (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute/University of North Carolina Press, 2018).


5 Provide precise Echevarria quote: I believe it is from Celestina’s Brood.
of superabundance and waste, I see in proliferation of pearls created a space not just of waste (although there was a tremendous amount of destruction and violence against humans and nature in their harvesting) but also of creation. The proliferation of pearls and the difficulties of controlling their circulation and assessment made space for the expression of independent judgement and the performance of independent action. We see this agency in the actions of pearl divers, merchants, purchasers both poor and powerful, and in the transformation of baroque monstrosities into jewels of unimpeachable beauty by artisans of tremendous skill and imagination.

In spite of the centrality of the baroque to canonical explorations of the legacies of colonialism in Latin American cultural production, Baroque pearls themselves are not what first come to mind when one pictures pearls in the visual record of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Far more common are representations of perfectly matched white orbs adorning the necks and clothing of men and women alike. But even these seemingly straightforward depictions often hint at pearls’ increasing associations with the labor and wealth in the Atlantic world. Take for example this portrait by Pierre Mignard of the Marquise de Seignelay, completed in 1691, shortly after Mignard was appointed court painter to French king Louis XIV. 7

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7 Scholarly consensus about this painting had, for a time, analyzed the work along these lines, attributing the sea and volcano in the background (which was thought to be Vesuvius) to Mignard’s Italian-inflected style, a product of his career study with Italian school artists. Kim F. Hall reprints and discusses it in Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995). 251–252. See also Susan Dwyer Amussen, Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007), 67. On Louise de Kéroualle’s status as Charles II’s favorite mistress and her political power, see Nancy Klein Maguire, “The Duchess of Portsmouth: English Royal Consort and French Politician, 1670–85,” in R. Malcolm Smuts, ed., The Stuart Court and Europe: Essays in Politics and Political Culture (Cambridge, 1996), 263. There are a number of discussions of the use of pearls in depictions of black subjects in the several volumes of The Image of the Black in
One might pass by the above painting in London’s National Gallery and not give it much thought. A quick glance gives a fleeting impression of an aristocratic montage, a family portrait with a particularly strong maritime theme. This impression wouldn’t be wrong—the women depicted, Catherine-Thérèse de Goyon de Matignon Thorigny, was the widow of the Marquis de Seignelay, and Mignard evoked the trappings of her deceased husband’s maritime career. The Marquis, Jean-Baptiste Antoine Colbert, had been Secretary of the Royal Navy and eldest son of the powerful stateman and finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert.

The standard reading of the portrait focuses on Mignard’s evocation of the Marquis’s naval career and the classical myths at play in his depiction of the Marquise and her children. The sea is everywhere in the portrait, from the blue waters behind the widow, to the blue cloak in which she is draped, to the cherub (likely a rendering of her youngest child) proffering the classic jewels of the sea, pearls and coral, in its chubby hand. The Marquise further wears a garland composed of pearls and coral and is clutching what appears to be a portrait medallion attached to a string of pearls. Even without knowing that Mignard painted the Marquise as the sea nymph Thetis (the mother of Achilles, depicted as the older child on her right), any viewer would have understood the maritime imagery and its suggestion that the family’s fortune and name depended upon the wealth generated by the sea.

*Western Art* (Cambridge, 2010-14) for example, Vol. III, Part I, “The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the “Age of Discovery” to the Age of Abolition” (Cambridge) 2010, 153-155, on black and white contrasts in cameos, and in Vol. III, Part II, on pearls as manacles, p. 226. See also the National Gallery’s description of this portrait.
However, an additional set of associations based not on myth but rather on West Indian realities suggest themselves when further consideration of the painting reveals the mountain in the background to be Mt. Pelé, the Martinican volcano. When this painting is considered not as a Mediterranean and Atlantic montage but rather as a particularly Caribbean tableau, we can begin to think more precisely about how alongside the mythological potency of the image, the land- and seascape depicted also evoked precise realities of a new world of Atlantic wealth. On one level, the portrait is a careful fantasy, its success dependent upon its engagement with accessible classical myths and the sitter’s family biography. But other works of Mignard’s suggest that he may have been drawing on additional associations rooted in knowledge of the precise political economy behind the Marquis’s West Indian wealth. Just as the depiction of the island of Martinique evoked West Indian prosperity without engaging directly with the enslaved labor upon which it depended, the pearls, particularly placed in a Caribbean context, called to mind more than just generic maritime wealth. They evoked one of the earliest sources of American wealth and an infamous experiment in managing the human and natural resources of the new world.

New ideas about nature, labor, and the relationship between subjects and objects accompanied the upheaval wrought by that this particular commodity boom, provoked by the frenetic harvests of American pearls that occurred in the wake of Columbus’s accidental encounter with the Americas. As this creative destruction unfolded along the shores of Venezuela and its outlying islands, pearls continued to be useful in art in

8Footnote in progress—I need to cite article from Diana Scarisbrick on this painting and Martinique, and perhaps Michelle Navakas on coral as well.
fantasies that elided the messy realities and the violent processes by which they themselves and the general wealth they evoked was created. But pearls also began to be compelling repositories of more complex associations, grounded (drowned?) in the realities of the places and people who produced them worldwide. Traveling throughout global markets—used as cash and jewelry in quantities small and large, trade to reaffirm friendships, pay armies, and navigate private fortunes on the downturn, pearls were, to invoke Arjun Appadurai, “things-in-motion”, invested with diverse values, expectations, and associations.  

Carla Nappi notes how material goods are “possessed of lives and biographies that trace transformations in their meaning and value,”; this was no less true of pearls, of any shape, color, or size. What knowledge did these artifacts carry with them and how did they shape peoples’ perception of their worth? What labor regimes and environments produced these pearls and the jewels into which they breathed life? To quote Marcy Norton, “modes of interaction produce particular subjectivities”: this chapter, and the larger project from which it emerges, considers the modes of interactions that surrounded pearl production and the subjectivities they revealed and produced.  

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus solely on how these lessons were embodied in the jewels crafted by artisans working with baroque (from the Spanish *barrueca*) irregular pearl specimens. Baroque pearls were the aesthetic antithesis of the

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pearls depicted in the Mignard portrait. The idealized version of pearls pictured here—the luminescent round baubles draped around the Marquise’s neck—could be used generally to evoke, in an uncomplicated fashion, maritime lucre and female sensuality. In reality, pearls were rarely white and perfectly circular and round—they were infinitely varied and often quite irregular. Abundant and existing in all sizes and qualities, pearls were also an accessible jewel, increasingly associated with global markets and the exoticism of a newly connected world. They proved to be a useful vehicle for artists, artisans, and consumers to explore these complex and changing realities—both subtly, as Mignard does in the above portrait—and explicitly, as did the anonymous artisans who created the below jewels with baroque pearls.

Baroque pearls—the misshapen, irregular varietals—are the most obvious expressions of pearls’ essential diversity and irregularity. From a biological perspective, all pearls are an aberration of nature, a beautiful, accidental product of an unwanted encounter between an intruding object (a grain of sand; a piece of shell; a tiny parasite) and the mantle of a bivalve. As the living creature’s biology responds to protect itself from this external assault, it extrudes a milky white substance (nacre) around the offending object—this nucleus, born of assault, becomes the nucleus of something beautiful as its white layers of nacre harden and thicken to form a pearl. In reality, this process is variable and shaped by many factors—the shape of the enclosing shell, the minerals and pollution in the water, the shape of the originating foreign object, and sheer chance. Unsurprisingly, then, pearls in reality exist in infinite varieties. Small, oddly-shaped, and variably-colored specimens are far more common than the perfect glowing orbs so common in artwork of the early modern period. Pearls’ complexity and variety
were a part of their appeal—and often the most extravagant, bulbous, irregular specimens, baroques—were explicitly used by jewelers to explore the diversity of the world through fantastical creations.

The three baroque jewels considered here all are held in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum as part of the Kunst- and Wunderkammer collection. The first is the head of an African man, the second the body of a merman, and the last a bulbous baroque pearl so striking in its irregularity that all the artist needed to do was frame it in gilt and enamel to better underscore its beauty. Each of these jewels ask us to consider the particular valences of pearls and the types of exploration they enabled. Both artisan and collector contemplated and sought to contain, metaphorically and literally, these exotic symbols of a wondrous world.

The inclusion of these baroque jewels in the Vienna Kunstkammer collection attests to the range and complexity of the early modern Habsburg realm, which extended into the Americas and stretched (with contested and fluctuating boundaries) across southern, central and northern Europe for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Artisans and objects traveled throughout these far-flung territories along global networks, highly prized at the courts of various collectors from the House of Habsburg. War and political shifts redistributed individual rulers’ holdings. Today, the core of the museum’s collection contain the Kunst- and Wunderkammer of Ferdinand II of Tirol

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11 My thanks to Beatriz Chadour for introducing me to this collection of baroque jewels.
13 Paula Findlen identifies this expanding global imaginary as being “the single most important new development in the history of early modern things” in “Early Modern Things: Setting Objects in Motion” in Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things*, (pp).
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(1529-1595) as well those of Emperor Rudolph II (1552-1612) and Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614-1662).14

Beyond serving as a record of Habsburg patronage and power, the baroque jewels discussed here also reflect the early modern impulse to contain and control the wonders of the world. The containment happened twice: first, artisans transformed these natural baroque pearls into jewels, making their worth visible through their own imagination and skill. The jewel were then contained once more through their inclusion in a collection of similar objects. Pearls, baroque pearls in particular, were coveted by rulers who prided themselves on accumulating exotic material objects from around the world. Pearls, as signifiers of maritime wealth, and increasingly associated with exotic labor regimes, peoples, and places, figured prominently in these collections. Fantasies about origin—as much as realities—were central to pearls’ appeal in the early modern jewelry market.

Although there is no way to know where exactly in the world the baroque pearls discussed here originated, it is entirely possible that they came from the Americas and indisputable that their perceived worth was shaped by transformations caused by the intense exploitation of the Venezuelan fisheries. 15

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14 Develop this discussion and/or footnote on the origins of the collection? Perhaps bring in Johnson, Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe? I think Paula’s suggestion of making a more explicit connection to the commercial/financial networks of the Fugger and Welser families and how they served as links across Habsburg realms is a very good one—I welcome additional feedback from seminar participants.

What rich vein of associations did the artisan draw on while crafting this medallion, c. 1540—a regal portrait of the head and torso of an African, decorated with several pendant baroque pearls?

[IMAGE 2]

The only hint of origin is that the medallion was made in Milan. Perhaps the choice of baroques was purely an aesthetic one, born of a desire to contrast the onyx of the African’s head with the white of the pearls. But then, why baroque pearls as opposed to more standard specimens? The decision begins to make sense when the history of the American pearl fisheries is considered, together with their implications for pearl circulation as well as ideas about pearls themselves: the peoples and places associated with their production. 16

Pearls were not an unfamiliar product of the American encounter but they were a particularly potent symbol of the wealth and complexities it engendered. Produced the world over in any bivalve, they were particularly associated with the wealth of the far east. Unsurprisingly, then, pearls led the list of items Columbus sought on his 1492 voyage, and his chance encounter with the Caribbean and South American coastline led to the establishment of settlements focused on pearl trading and pearl harvesting off the present-day coast of Venezuela.

These settlements and their motley inhabitants produced tremendous pearl wealth in the early sixteenth century. After a couple of decades of the slow flow of pearls from

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Baroque. Christopher S. Wood explores the intersection of origin and imagination in shifting perceptions and appeal of artistic production in Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2008.)

16 In revised version, expand my analysis of this image to reflect on import of Milan as place of origin as well as echoes of Pliny.
the region in the wake of Columbus’s voyages, the number of pearls flowing into the port
of Seville in payment of the crown’s tax on a fifth (the *quinto*) of total production
increased enormously in the 1520s. Pearls were very difficult to tax: their tiny size made
them impossible to imprint or alter beyond drilling (which was difficult to do and not
always desirable). The *quinto* was a very imprecise way of measuring pearls—Measuring
them by weight failed to capture the qualities for which they were most prized (luster and
color and match-ability in addition to size), but *quinto* figures nonetheless give a sense of
the enormous pearl harvests. The 1521 *quinto* payment of 200 *marcos* of pearls, or
roughly 100 pounds of pearls, doubling the average payment of the better part of the
preceding decade. In 1522, the figure tripled, and from 1522-1526, the small island of
Cubagua, the center of the pearl fishing industry in the Americas, sent an average of 700
*marcos* of pearls to the Crown each ear. In 1527, a staggering 1200 *marcos*—or 600
pounds—of pearls were sent from the desert island to Seville in payment of the *quinto*.
And these numbers reflected at most a fifth of the total pearl hauls, and almost certainly
less. (If ever there were a jewel that was easy to rob, it was pearls.) The other 80 percent
dispersed widely—staying on the islands to be used as currency or made into jewelry or
traveling far and wide throughout the Atlantic and beyond.  

Faced with the challenge of trying to manage this chaotic diversity of pearls and
the inadequacies of the *quinto* system, Spanish officials turned to language as a way of
attempting to contain and control an unmanageable diversity.  

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17 Provide original citations for these figures, or cite my book.
18 In Roland Greene’s recent study of five essential words he deems “engines” of cultural elaboration in the Renaissance, he emphasizes the importance of practice in the creation of meaning. Roland Greene in *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) The five words of the title are invention, language, resistance, blood and world. A central part of Greene’s argument centers on the new
words that began to be employed in the Caribbean pearl fisheries by the 1520s to sort and channel distinct qualities of pearls (these terms often evolved to reflected practices with pearls both in the fisheries and beyond), *barrueca* stands out. This word—which become *baroque* in English—is of uncertain origin, perhaps related to the word for wart (*verruga*), another type of a misshapen protuberance. The term was assigned to the most misshapen specimens that the Caribbean oysters produced, one of many subjectively-assessed terms in circulation. This language of administration underscored the subjective nature of subjects themselves, as the accuracy of categorization depended upon the independent judgement of the official doing the categorizing.

It was not just the pearls that posed a challenge to Spanish officials. The numbers of skyrocketing pearl harvests pointed to dramatic changes in the labor regime of harvesting oysters. Alongside pearls themselves, tales of the risks pearl diving entailed began to circulated alongside the pearls that flooded European markets from this Caribbean outpost. In Gonzálo Fernández de Oviedo’s 1520s account of the Venezuelan pearl fisheries, he described the lives of privation and dangerous labor performer by the indigenous divers and that produced this extraordinary wealth. These indigenous divers were joined in increasing numbers in the 1520s by enslaved Africans from the west coast of the continent; they performed this life-threatening labor and came to largely control the social and economic dynamics of the fisheries, as they were the ones who knew the importance of the spoken vernacular in the early modern period. The struggles that occurred around the incipient state’s attempts to control literal and practical vocabularies of wealth management occurred at precisely the moment when spoken vernaculars within Europe were gaining ground, and local practices accelerated the pace of cultural elaboration. My book echoes this assertion, but focuses on vernacular practices of resource management rather than on spoken language. Green observes that era saw “the first sustained attention to the vernaculars as vehicles of art and knowledge.” (10).
where to find the pearl-containing oysters, as well as the ones to open the shells and harvest the pearls. As Paula Findlen notes, “humans are both subjects and objects”\(^\text{19}\), and this was never more clearly illustrated than in the case of enslaved human beings, who were treated as commodities to be bought and sold but whose humanity could never be denied. Humans’ fundamental diversity and ungovernability—the essential privacy of the mind—were on display in the pearl fisheries alongside the similar lessons learned from pearls.

Pearls were ungovernable things whose smuggleability and subjective appeal further underscored the enduring independence of people, as both possessed essential qualities that undermined attempts to control the flow of objects and the actions of subjects. As much as Spanish officials might try to govern the circulation of people and pearls in these settlements, they could not: pearls moved easily from hand to hand and people of all backgrounds socialized and worked with one another. This reality infused pearls’ value throughout global markets, as they became disassociated from a precise origin in the Far East but retained their association with the global exotic.

Unsurprisingly, given the degree to which divers shaped the circulation of pearls in the fisheries, the jewel circulated widely in the Americas and beyond. Different types of pearls were put to different uses in the fisheries and beyond—cash, secular and religious jewelry, payment for enslaved Africans delivered to the Americas or for beleaguered armies fighting wars across Europe. Baroque pearls were often the most sought-after varietals. This was true in the early decades of the sixteenth century: in 1525 Spanish King Charles V (who received some 34.5 million American pearls, of 15,000

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marcos of the jewel over the course of his rein, 2/3 of them from the Venezuelan fisheries) ordered officials in the House of Trade to set aside large and irregular Caribbean for him from the shipments arriving into Seville. 20

The Pearl Coast of Venezuela (as the region came to be known) was from the pearl fisheries ‘chaotic heyday onward characterized by a tremendous diversity of inhabitants. Indigenous inhabitants from the circum-Caribbean—ranging from Guaqueríes from the nearby South American mainland, to captured individuals from the interior from modern-day Columbia to Brazil to Antillean islands to the Northeast such as the Bahamas—to enslaved Africans from the Atlantic islands to large swathes of the West African coast, to Europeans of all origins. This diversity was no accident—it reflected the realities of governance in Europe and the harsh, violent, diasporic realities that characterized the Atlantic world from the moment that Africa, Europe, and the Americas began to be in accelerated and sustained, profound contact in the wake of the 1492 voyages—their peoples, cultures, languages, microbes, flora and fauna forever intertwined.

An awareness of the diversity that characterized these pearl fisheries and the changing early modern pearl trade in general, we begin to be able to imagine the paths that might have brought the baroque pearls into the Vienna Kunstkammer. The major German banking families who financed Ferdinand II of Tirol, (1529-1595)—whose collections form a central part of the kunst- and Wunderkammern in the museum today—had extensive ties to these American pearl fisheries as well as to eastern markets. The

20 See American Baroque, 55-61, for discussions of early pearl shipments and royal preferences. Next revisions will streamline footnotes to include original citations.
entire province of Venezuela was governed by the German banking family of the Welsers from 1528-1556 (a stretch of time that encompassed the fisheries’ most lucrative years). The family’s involvement in the region established an early and critical link between the Iberian-claimed Americas, Northern European markets, and prominent banking families’ global commercial connections.

Although the enduring and constraining vocabularies that continue to characterize the historiography of the early Americas suggest that that European contenders occupied distinct spheres of influence, in reality political borders were porous and alliances ever-changing. Thus, the Venezuelan concession granted to the Welsers by the Spanish King Charles I (later Charles V) in return for their support for his successful bid to become Holy Roman Emperor was not an aberration but rather characteristic of early modern European politicking. The German presence in early sixteenth century, and the Spanish Habsburg crown’s close ties to Northern Europe, shed light on the possible provenance of the pearls pictured in the three baroque jewels discussed here, and certainly their presence in Habsburg Kunstkammer. The Welsers, along with the powerful banking family of the Fuggers and the Herwarts, played a significant role in distributing pearls from the Caribbean fisheries in their most prosperous early decades. Lazarus Nürnberger, an employee of the Herwart family based in Seville, oversaw the arrival of pearls into Seville and oversaw the distribution of pearls from the east and West Indies—a job facilitated by his experience working as a commercial factor in India the previous decade. 21 The Herwart family, based in Augsburg, had longstanding relations with the Portuguese crown to which they loaned money and played a major role in the jewel trade.

21 Warsh, American Baroque, 56. Provide original cites?
The Fugger factory (in addition to other German factories) in Antwerp (where the Portuguese chose to receive all their East Indian pepper supply) became a center of jewel trading alongside these other valuable goods—thus serving as a Northern European landing place and distribution hub for the riches of the east and West Indies from the earliest decades of these newly-established global exchange routes.  

The global trade circuits established in the American pearl fisheries in the early sixteenth century set in motion a shift in pearls’ valence by which they ceased to be associated solely with the wealth of the far east and instead came to be signifiers of the global exotic. When Spanish king Philip IV sought in 1626 to impress upon a fellow potentate, the Shah of Persia, the wealth and extent of his domains, he turned to the products of these still powerful American pearl fisheries. And it was not just any old pearl that he sought to send to impress his rival potentate: he specifically ordered that the Shah be sent “baroque pearls from the Castilian Indies”. It was not that other types of pearls ceased to be sought-after; but their variety appealed to the human variation in taste, and baroques—the most unusual of them all—captured particularly well the diversity of the world. In consideration of this particular medallion, then, it seems likely that the choice of baroques was not random at all. By the 1540s, pearls were well-known to be a symbol and source of American bounty. Baroques—these unusual, bulbous products of this unfamiliar American territory—stood for the compelling and lucrative complexity of

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22 On the centrality of the Fugger Antwerp factory to Iberian trade routes, see Mark Häberlein, *The Fuggers of Augsburg: Pursuing Wealth and Honor in Renaissance Germany* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 52-54.

23 Paula suggests that I might close with this anecdote, linking it to Riello and Gerritsen, *Global Gifts*. I like this idea and am planning on rearranging this section along these lines, in addition to whatever feedback the Nov. 7 seminar provides.
these unfamiliar lands, associated with command human and nature wealth. These associations are what we see on display in this baroque medallion.

As pearls tumbled out of ships’ holds and sailors’ pockets, observers reflected on what the proliferation of this luxury jewel would do to Spanish society.\textsuperscript{24} The brutality of this labor regime and the social upheaval caused by the explosion of pearls did not go uncommented. Following the early account of Oviedo (and whatever reports circulated from returning sailors and opportunists) the brutality of pearl diving figured prominently in the condemnation of the Spanish enterprise of the Indies voiced by fray Bartolomé de las Casas (who began drafting his account in the late 1520s, a work that would become the centerpiece of the black legend about alleged Spanish cruelty and mismanagement of human and natural resources in the Americas. Present in the fisheries in their heyday, Las Casas helped to make famous this corner of the new world as a site of spectacular cruelty and suffering, a sobering counterpoint to the reports of great pearl wealth that made such money for the crown and its Northern European allies such as the Fuggers and Welsers.

Furthermore, other powerful chroniclers of the earliest decades of the Spanish Atlantic endeavor remarked on the social impact of the influx of so many pearls, a jewel that formally had been much harder to obtain and thus associated with elites. “Even the black women” wear strands of pearls, wrote José de Acosta. Reflecting on the jewel’s enduring popularity, another chronicler, López de Gomara, noted the connection that is made in material expression in the medallion above: “perhaps it is because they are brought from another worlds, and before they were discovered they were brought from

\textsuperscript{24} On Spanish fears of the corrupting effect of excessive American wealth, see Elvira Vilches, \textit{New World Gold: Cultural Anxiety and Monetary Disorder in Early Modern Spain} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.)
very far away, or perhaps it is because they cost the lives of men.”

The association between pearls, the wealth of the new world, and suffering was memorialized by Michel de Montaigne in the 1570s in his essay “Of Coaches”, in which he reflected on the consumer desires that fueled the destruction brought about by the encounter with the Americas: “So many cities razed, so many nations exterminated, so many millions of people put to the sword, and the richest and most beautiful part of the world turned upside down, for the traffic of pearls and pepper”.

The particular connection between pearls and black bodies visible in this medallion was thus not casual but one forged in labor and practice in the fisheries and explored in all sorts of art in the early modern period. It is visible in in famous jewels, such as the so-called “Drake Jewel”, gifted by England’s Queen Elizabeth’s to Francis Drake in the late 1580s, in which a pendant pearl hangs beneath a knot of smaller pearls, all suspended from a medallion bearing the queen’s portrait on one side and an African face on the other. It is also on equally (if not more) striking display in far less well-known pieces, such as in the anonymous baroque jewel in Baltimore’s Walters museum, showing an enslaved figure, its body formed by a baroque pearl, with its hands manacled behind it. [INCLUDE THIS IMAGE IN NEXT DRAFT] The new maritime empires of the 16th century were associated early on—by the time of the creation of this medallion in the 1540s—with these two sources of wealth, one natural from beneath the waves, the pearl, and the other human, the enslaved African. Pearls would be eclipsed by other sources of wealth in ledger books and in the imagination over time, but the centrality of

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25 Quoted on p. 81, American Baroque. Provide original cite in new draft.
26 American Baroque, 104.
enslaved African labor—so central in this earliest of extractive American industries, the pearl fisheries—would remain. The choice then, of baroque pearls, to decorate this medallion, is a precise evocation of an early, brutal experiment in grappling and managing the complexity of a new world and the types of human and nature wealth—the subjects and objects—that it would generate and consume. Though their place of manufacture was likely Europe, jewels made with baroque pearls and engaging with images of Africans embody Gruzinski’s notion of an American creole aesthetic, elaborated in a crucible of cultural and natural transformation.27

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Even as pearls came to be associated with the particular combination of new maritime wealth built increasingly upon the labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants, they did not lose their longstanding associations with the mysteries and magic of the sea. It is this mystery that we see reflected in the second jewel, pictured here.

[IMAGE 3]

Pearls’ retained their long-standing associations with the mystery, allure, and danger of the sea even as they accumulated additional associations with the changing realities of maritime empire. Pearls’ mixture of erotic, dangerous, and compelling qualities were well established by the time Pliny the Elder wrote his Natural History in the first century C.E.,

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in which he emphasized the jewel’s sensual appeal with mixture of outrage and fascination. Emerging as they did from living creatures and requiring men to dive naked into the depths of the sea to retrieve them, pearls provoked, in his view, an unnatural desire in humans. Believed to be a product of a sexualized encounter between an oyster and dew drops that entered the bivalve’s shell, to pry a pearl from a shell was an act of violence that, as Pliny explained, provoked a motherly protective impulse in the oyster. There was a mystery to the oceans—their depths and what happened beneath them—and pearls’ allure reflected this oceanic attraction and repulsion. The ocean promised great wealth and provided nourishment in the form of fish, but it also threatened men’s lives. Pearls were far more than just a delicate jewel—they were a product of the violence and mystery of the ocean. And this frisson of mystery and myth endured even global consumers of pearls began simultaneously to build increasingly varied and accurate ideas about where and how pearls were produced. This mixture of fantasy and reality is what moved the pearl market—they were a vehicle for the imagination, for a semi-known, expanding world.

The enduring appeal of myths and the wondrous is visible in this baroque-bodied merman, crafted at the beginning of the seventeenth century. What better use for an irregular beauty such as the one that forms this figure’s torso than a famed mythical creature of the watery world? This pendant would have been right at home alongside another famous collection late sixteenth century, that of the Medici family in Florence. Their collections revealed their fascinations with pearls as symbol of maritime wealth in an era of expanding global connections, and their assorted pearl-related collections reveal the mixture of fantasy and reality that had come to characterize the global imagination.
about pearls and their origins. In artistic renditions from their collections pearls are depicted with attention to the labor regimes that produce them as well as embedded in mythological contexts that long shaped pearls’ place in the visual imaginary, including their pairing with coral (as in the portrait of the Marquise de Seignelay) as two maritime jewels associated with the ocean, disassociated from the processes by which they were harvested and gathered.

I would like to close with a final baroque jewel: a seventeenth-century medallion composed of an ungainly baroque pearl.

[IMAGE 4]

The pearl is so marvelous and grotesque in its imperfection that the artisan has done nothing more than frame it in a gold filigree oval inlaid with an orderly wreath of flowers, as if to better contrast the lumpy defiance of the pearl with the unbroken, obliging circle of the floral border. The specimen’s baroque curves and folds evoke volcanic disruption, of nature over-spilling its borders in defiance of the containing calm of the flower chain. The artisan’s imagination does not need to—and perhaps cannot—perform an act of translation. The pearl’s unusual lumpy extravaganza is the point: the jewel highlights the tension between order and disorder, between the chaos and control of nature.

The medallion also echoes the sentiment expressed in the Spanish king’s gift of Caribbean baroques to the Shah of Persia, discussed above: pearls, by the seventeenth century, did not need to be the white baubles evoked in aristocratic portraits such as the one with which this chapter began. They were known to be infinitely varied and

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28 See Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence*. Maybe also Detlef Heikamp?
accessible and to emerge from all corners of the world as products of diverse labor regimes and natural habitats. No pearl embodied the early modern recognition of, and fascination with, the world’s diversity than the baroque pearl.

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In Roland Greene’s *Five Words*, he concludes that the baroque as a form of aesthetic expression appears at the end of the Renaissance “as a reflection on humanism.”29 In the book from which this chapter emerged, I consider why this was the case, arguing for the centrality of human practice to the emergence of this new, expansive understanding of the term. I argue that the chaos of pearls—their abundance, their infinite variety—prompted the imperial impulse to order and categorize and also came to stand for its defiance. This legacy lives on in the term’s enduring utility in various fields of cultural production as a metaphor for unfettered and extravagant expression.30

As explored by Latin American and Caribbean writers of the twentieth century, the irregular, extravagant beauty of the baroque—the pearl being, like the post-1492 Americas, a wondrous product of an unwanted and violent intrusion—stands as a central expression of American identity. Pearls as material culture invite us to explore this history and consider how artisans grappled with the lessons born of this maelstrom of trade and exploitation. The story of the early modern pearl trade allows us to place the baroque back in the context from which it emerged. In doing so, we come to view the

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29 Greene, *Five Words*.
30 On the baroque as “decorative excess” and the extreme, see David R. Castillo, “Horror (Vacui): The Baroque Condition” in Spadaccini and Martin-Estudillo, *Hispanic Baroques*, 87-104.
baroque not as a pathology of nature but as an aesthetic monument to the fundamental independence of action and imagination and the relentless early modern tension between order and disorder.  

The centrality of baroque pearls in artisan-crafted baroque jewels and these jewels’ prominence in *kunst- and Wunderkammer* embody this dissonance. The baroque pearl defies notions of beauty that rely upon symmetry and order. It is a manifestation of unpredictable and unfettered expression. As such, it must be doubly contained: first, made recognizable via the artifice and imagination of the artisan and then furthered contained and classified through its inclusion in a cabinet of wonders.

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