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“EVEN THE BLACK WOMEN
WEAR STRANDS OF PEARLS”

*Assessing the Worth of Subjects and Objects
in a New Era, 1540–1600*



Cubagua's 1541 destruction shifted but did not end pearl fishing along the Venezuelan littoral. The tsunami that brought a dramatic end to the Pearl Coast's most lucrative years also coincided with the dawn of a new era of Spanish imperial control, one in which the reins of overseas empire began to be more tightly (if still imperfectly) held by the crown. In the aftermath of Cubagua's devastation, settlements moved down the coast and to the larger island of Margarita, and pearl fishing continued to draw private and royal investors.¹

In the decades that followed, the pearl fisheries continued to be the site of conversations about wealth creation. The crown, seeking to draw this corner of the colonial world closer to the imperial administration, took an approach to the fisheries' governance that combined concessions to and rejection of the political economy advanced by the fisheries in the previous decades. Meanwhile, the conquests and profits of Tierra Firme (the American mainland, in particular the major silver deposits found at Potosí in upper Peru in 1545 and Zacatecas in New Spain in 1547) soon eclipsed the profits drawn from the Caribbean's underwater mines and turned attention away from the Caribbean islands. The immense riches and challenges produced by this new stage of colonization drew the American mainland into the heart of the empire's domestic identity in a way that had not occurred previously. Even as the crown tightened the mechanisms in place for governing the human and natural wealth of its domains, the Pearl Coast remained a thorn in the crown's side

1. The continual refining of the crown's approach to the administration of the New World was further illustrated midcentury by Charles V's decision to found an archive in Valladolid to house the records generated by the imperial enterprise. Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge, 2003), 26, discusses the founding of the archive at Simancas. The archive was completed by Philip II in 1559.

because of its continually evolving and violent labor regime, its quicksilver product—pearls—and the challenging relations that developed among the settlements' free and unfree inhabitants.

The most explicit contemporary reflections on the pearl fisheries' early history and their significance came from within the Spanish empire itself, penned by royal chroniclers who considered the nature of this early experiment with wealth generation and management. Throughout the sixteenth century and beyond, chroniclers and natural historians exercised enormous influence in shaping Europe's understanding of the Atlantic explorations—of the physical nature of this new land and of the metaphorical nature of distinct parties' claims to control over it. In the context of the Counter-Reformation and Spain's continuing quest for religious orthodoxy, these critical reflections on the early pearl fisheries threatened to provide fuel for Spain's enemies and drew censorship. In 1556, the crown passed a law ordering that all books touching upon the history of the Indies must first be seen and approved by the Council of the Indies before publication. This order came too late for Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, however, which appeared in Seville in 1552 and Antwerp in 1579. The *Short Account* provided Spain's Protestant enemies with an invaluable critique of Spain's imperial misdeeds.²

2. Official chronicles reflected a long-standing tradition of narrative construction of authority, and these lengthy histories represented a far more refined and practiced idiom of reportage than the uneven, imperfect archival record of personal disputes and fiscal battles preserved by the incipient overseas bureaucracy. As decades passed, however, the crown feared the possible political and religious backlash of unfavorable accounts more than ever, particularly as the debate between Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda unfolded in Valladolid in 1550–1551. For a discussion of the Spanish crown's anxiety about the circulation of information related to the Indies, see Richard L. Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore, 2009), 110, 156–160, 172; and Kagan, “History,” in Evonne Levy and Kenneth Mills, eds., *Lexikon of the Hispanic Baroque: Transatlantic Exchange and Transformation* (Austin, Tex., 2013), 150–152. Juan Pimentel calls these chronicles some of “the classical products of Iberian science . . . the genre in which the first great contributions of the scientific knowledge of the New World appeared.” See Pimentel, “The Iberian Vision: Science and Empire in the Framework of a Universal Monarchy, 1500–1800,” in Roy MacLeod, ed., *Nature and Empire: Science and the Colonial Enterprise*, *Osiris*, 2d Ser., XV (2000), 17–30. María M. Portuondo discusses this trend toward censorship in *Secret Science: Spanish Cosmography and the New World* (Chicago, 2009), 104–106. The crown began banning books that provided troubling accounts of Spanish behavior in the Indies in 1527, just as Las Casas

One of the chroniclers to suffer the crown's displeasure was Francisco López de Gómara, historian and archrival of Las Casas. As Spain entered into a period of soul-searching regarding the adverse economic and moral consequences of the sudden influx of wealth from the New World, López de Gómara offered frank assessments of the crown's initial mismanagement of the empire, emphasizing the misdeeds of rogue conquistadors and the havoc they wrought. From the perspective of the monarchy and the Council of the Indies, such an account was at odds with the mission of defending the legitimacy of the Spanish presence in the New World. Both López de Gómara's personal enmities and various complaints about the content of his work (largely having to do with his vilification of Francisco Pizarro and critique of the conquest of Peru) led the crown to prohibit the sale and distribution of his wildly successful *Historia general de las Indias* in 1553, just two years after its initial publication (the *Historia* appeared in nine editions during this period). Clandestine editions of the *Historia* continued to appear after the official ban, however, both within and beyond Spain. By the end of the sixteenth century, ten Italian editions, nine French editions, and two editions in English had been published. The crown could do nothing to suppress the appetite for such critiques of Spain's imperial endeavors and little to prevent the circulation of accounts such as López de Gómara's.³

López de Gómara's criticisms of particular aspects of Spain's early engagement in the Americas revealed his understanding of the hierarchy of influences and actors at play in the settlements' earliest days. In his account of the pearl fisheries, he condemned Las Casas and pointed to the issues raised by the mismanagement of the region. López de Gómara implied that it was only after failing as conqueror that Las Casas became a Dominican friar. In doing so, López de Gómara continued, he "failed to augment royal revenues, ennobles workers, or send pearls to the Flemish." These were indeed the roles envisioned for the pearl fisheries in these critical exploratory years: they were expected to contribute to royal revenues, to exemplify the crown's governance of subjects, and to further Spain's European alliances. But in their

began to write his monumental *Historia* and less than a decade before Fernández de Oviedo would publish the first volumes of his *Historia general y natural*. On the Spanish crown's midcentury tightening of censorship rules, see Kathleen Ann Myers, *Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of America: A New History for a New World*, trans. Nina M. Scott (Austin, Tex., 2007), esp. the introduction and chapter 7.

3. See Kagan, *Clio and the Crown*, 159–160, for more on López de Gómara.

unchecked production of pearls, they served principally to undermine order, rather than to embody it.⁴

Many observers marveled at the proliferation of pearls and the social consequences of their abundance. López de Gómara remarked, "Now everyone wears pearls and seed pearls, men and women, rich and poor; never in any province in the world did so many pearls enter as in Spain, and in such a short period of time." Another chronicler, Garcilaso de la Vega, marveled in the 1560s that there were so many pearls entering southern Spanish ports that they were sold "in a heap in the India house at Seville just as if they were some kind of seed." Along the same lines, José de Acosta observed with a degree of shock that pearls were so abundant that "hasta las negras traen sartos"—or even black women wear strands of them. The profusion of pearls upended traditional hierarchies; the use of this luxury object now muddled distinctions among subjects that the possession of pearls had heretofore helped to mark.⁵

Why were pearls so highly sought after? Reflecting on pearls' popularity, López de Gómara captured the jewel's association with the struggle at the heart of the imperial project: the extension of control over distant places and people. Echoing Pliny's reflections on the relationship between pearls' appeal and their dangerous provenance, López de Gómara wondered whether so many people sought pearls "because they are brought from another world, and before they were discovered they were brought from very far away, or perhaps it is because they cost the lives of men." Pearls brought their bearers a piece of the imperial drama: proximity to exotic peoples and places and the violence and death inherent in the quest for overseas wealth.⁶

4. Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia general de las Indias*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1941), I, 186.

5. Ibid., II, 206. Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas, and General History of Peru* (1609), ed. and trans. H. V. Livermore (Austin, Tex., 1966), I, 532; [José] de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City, 1962), book 4, chap. XV, 168. The proliferation of wealth of various types from the New World raised concerns about the relationship between New World wealth and Spain's economic and moral decay. See Elvira Vilches, *New World Gold: Cultural Anxiety and Monetary Disorder in Early Modern Spain* (Chicago, 2010), for a discussion of Spain's moral and material crisis.

6. López de Gómara, *Historia general de las Indias*, II, 207: "Quizá es porque se traen del otro mundo, y se traían, antes que se descubriese, de muy lejos, o porque cuestan hombres."

It was not only pearls that challenged the Spanish crown's midcentury push to regain royal prerogative in the New World and implement procedures for categorizing and managing its people and products. An inherently destabilizing diversity remained at the heart of the expanding empire. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Spanish crown had gone to great lengths to forge or force alliances with (and claim sovereignty over) peoples from the Americas to the Philippines. Throughout these varied domains, the crown confronted the question of how to husband human and material capital as new resources were discovered and new combinations of subjects were brought together under a single ruler. On the eve of Philip II's marriage to Mary Tudor in 1554, Spain ruled over an empire of unparalleled size. Yet, even as the crown expanded its jurisdiction around the globe, within Iberia and Europe more broadly it faced profound challenges to its rule and religious orthodoxy.

As tensions within Spain's Holy Roman imperial possessions grew, the monarchy's European holdings fractured (seen most spectacularly in the outbreak of violence in the Netherlands in 1566 (an early episode in Spain's eighty-year conflict with the Dutch). Castile was left at the center of the monarchy's administrative identity even as its global imperial claims reached unprecedented size. Fissures also appeared within Iberia, where lingering questions of religious and cultural identity and subjecthood came to a head in the Morisco Revolt of 1568–1570. Philip II's brief union with Mary Tudor of England (1554–1558) and Spain's annexation of Portugal in 1580 underscored the powerful influence of dynastic concerns on the shape and range of emerging overseas empires. A popular song from the time captured the pervasive sense of anxiety about Spain's unexpected alliances and the accompanying cultural upheaval. The singer yearned for home, free of complex commitments abroad: "I don't want any love affairs in England / I have better ones in my homeland / Oh God of my homeland / Take me away from here / Ay, England is no longer for me." The song expressed a prevailing sense of discomfort with the possibility of intimate alliances with strangers; although the ditty was ostensibly about a love affair, it seems to have channeled collective wariness of Spain's political bedfellows.⁷

The challenges posed by a heterogeneous subject base at home and abroad coincided with the onset of severe financial crises that compelled new fiscal relationships with the monarchy's far-flung territories and inhabitants. The

7. Carta de Lorenzo de Castro, Dec. 29, 1557, RBM, II/2186, doc. 32: "Yo no quiero amores en Ynglaterra / Pues otros mejores tengo yo en mi tierra / Ay Dios de mi tierra / saqueísme de aquí / Ay que Ynglaterra ya no es para mí."

crown suffered its first bankruptcy in 1557, and to raise money Philip II (who had succeeded his father as king in 1556, ruling until his death in 1598) turned not only to taxation but also to unusual measures such as seizing money from America, issuing royal favors and patents in exchange for payment, and taking costly loans—measures that contributed to the lingering tension between the crown's desire to reassert its control over its New World territories while also delegating its administration. In Portugal's overseas territories in Brazil and the Estado da Índia (as Portugal's eastern empire was known), the union of the crowns (1580–1640) largely left administrative practices in place, out of necessity more than principle.⁸

Amid these sea changes in Iberian imperial power, subjects throughout Iberian territories sought to ascertain what this changing shape of the empire would mean for them as the crown wrestled with the form and structure of its rule. Pearls offer a window into the negotiations at the heart of this process, as individuals and centralizing states refined their understandings of the creation and assessment of value. In the pearl fisheries, perceptions of expertise shaped hierarchies of worth. Beyond the fisheries, the paths traveled by pearls reaffirmed the value of networks of alliance over imperial regulations intended to channel the flow of objects and subjects between realms.

As the crown sought to husband the wealth of empire, pearls skittered across borders and between hands, finding their place with moneylenders and diplomats, enslaved divers and Jesuit priests. In these multiple global exchanges involving pearls, we see the intersection of personal imperatives and private judgments about wealth with the emerging imperial bureaucracy that sought to order and contain people and products. In patterns of both production and circulation, the independence of action and of judgment by subjects played a critical role.

"All in Confusion and Together":

Chaos and Control in the Fisheries

The demands for labor and the complexities posed by the indigenous and African labor force continued to be at the center of the profits and problems of the pearl fisheries throughout the second half of the sixteenth century. In the 1540s, in the wake of Cubagua's destruction, profit-seekers established fisheries in Cabo de la Vela, and, three years later, the inhabitants of the new settlements petitioned for the license to import one hundred black slaves

8. For more on the financial crises of these years, see John Lynch, *Spain, 1516–1598: From Nation State to World Empire* (Oxford, 1991), 134–135.

for “the farms and pearl fisheries.” This expansion occurred concomitantly with renewed royal attention to the issue of abuses of indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. A significant element of the crown’s move to tighten oversight of its overseas holdings was the publication of the *Recopilación de leyes de los reinos de las Indias* (Laws of the Indies) in 1542, a compilation of rules governing all matters concerning Spain’s New World territories. Among its many specifications, the *Recopilación de leyes* ordered that no free Indians be forced to work as divers and that the bishops and judges of Venezuela oversee the decent treatment of the slaves in the fisheries. If the risk of death in the fisheries could not be avoided, then pearl fishing in the area was to cease. Unsurprisingly, the laws had limited effect on the Pearl Coast. In 1546, the bishop of Santa Marta had to be reminded to obey the laws and to assure that Indians and blacks in the fisheries be given proper care. In the 1550s, the crown prohibited settlers from including blacks in their *encomiendas* (grants of native labor or tribute) or from buying Brazilian Indians from Portuguese merchants on Margarita—the law itself suggesting that both practices persisted. In spite of such regulations, inhabitants in these settlements continued to deal with the demands of life and labor in the fisheries as they saw fit and to blur the lines the crown hoped to draw among subjects.⁹

The crown hoped to solve the problems of the fisheries’ heterogeneous labor force by replacing it. Royal experts traveled to the settlements to report on best and worst practices, and the monarchy continued to support the proposals for pearl-fishing devices that might remove the need for human divers.

9. For requests for slaves and their presence (both African and Indian) in the pearl fisheries, see CC, II, 205 (June 30, 1543) (quotation), 230 (Feb. 12, 1548); AGI, AC: 1, legajo 1, fols. 108r–111r (June 5, 1546); and Richard Konetzke, *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de Hispanoamérica, 1493–1810*, I (1493–1592) (Madrid, 1953), 297 (Dec. 17, 1551), 339 (Sept. 21, 1556). Although one slave merchant complained in 1548 that he could not sell his brother’s black slaves on Margarita because of the poverty of the residents (CC, II, 230 [Feb. 12, 1548]), his claim seems suspicious; given inventories of slave holdings of Margarita residents and reactive legislation designed to curb illegal slave-trading practices in the 1550s, it is more likely that he hoped to find higher prices in newer settlements where residents would pay more. For a history of the early years of the Cabo de la Vela fisheries, see Manuel Luengo Muñoz, “Noticias sobre la fundación de la ciudad de Nuestra Señora Santa María de los Remedios del Cabo de la Vela,” *Anuario de estudios Americanos*, VI (1949), 757–797. Eduardo Barrera Monroy considers the origins and experiences of Indian divers in the mainland pearl fisheries in the last half of the sixteenth century in “Los esclavos de las perlas: Voces y rostros indígenas en la granjería de perlas del Cabo de la Vela (1540–1570),” *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico*, XXXIX, no. 61 (2002), 3–33.

In the context of Spain’s recent bankruptcy and general financial distress, the pearl-fishing devices proposed in the second half of the century were often cloaked in terms of recovery and restoration: obtaining pearls as a form of lost wealth alongside items lost in shipwrecks. This conceptualization of pearls as treasure belied the knowledge produced over the previous half century of pearls as the product of a living ecosystem; however, the new proposals did not entirely fail to incorporate the lessons of the previous fifty years. Much as the crown tried to separate indigenous and African subjects from the exploitation of this resource, those hoping to profit from the fisheries could not ignore the abundant evidence about how expertise shaped the harvesting of pearls. Thus, the new pearl-fishing machines no longer attempted to replace human labor altogether. Instead, they promised to substitute one kind of subject for another.

In the crown’s concessions to pearl-fishing entrepreneurs in the 1550s and 1560s, European approaches continued to coexist alongside a recognition of New World realities. Royal contracts continued to license Europeans (both Spaniards and non-Spaniards) to manage the wealth of the Indies while acknowledging that these new outposts of empire often depended upon the skills of unfamiliar peoples. Investors and inventors who ignored New World realities were destined for failure. For example, in 1565 the crown sponsored Pedro de Herrera, who received a license from the Council of the Indies, to employ his invention to get “from under water anything silver gold pearls that might have fallen into the sea.” His patent did not describe the device in any detail, nor did it make any mention of a labor force, which likely hastened its failure.¹⁰

Roughly ten years after Herrera received his license, the king granted a license to a Portuguese merchant, Captain Antonio Gómez de Acosta, to introduce “a number” of canoes and “up to 100 black slaves” into the pearl fisheries. The terms of Gómez de Acosta’s license addressed the link among different types of labor, expertise, and the subjecthood of various actors involved in pearl fishing. The contract specified that no one was to interfere with the merchant’s venture because of his Portuguese origin, and, although he was prohibited from employing Indians against their will, he was allowed to employ anyone who “understood” about pearl fisheries. This was a remarkable recognition that knowledge of pearl fishing conveyed authority to the people who possessed it. Gómez de Acosta’s license stopped short of

10. For Pedro de Herrera, see “Licencia para poder sacar oro de devajo del agua,” 1565, AGI, IG: 425, legajo 24, fol. 228.

recognizing explicitly what fishery residents had been saying for more than fifty years: people who best understood the industry were the pearl divers.¹¹

A year later, in 1568, amid concern over the treatment of Indians in the pearl fisheries along the Venezuelan coast, the crown granted permission to a trio of men (Antonio Luis de Cabrera, Diego de Lira, and Antonio de Luna) to introduce into the fisheries a new “device to fish for and retrieve from underwater pearls gold and silver and things from sunken ships.” Their grant from the council also included a license to bring with them one hundred black slaves, though the labor they were to perform was not specified. It is unclear what their device looked like or why it failed, though it is clear the three men anticipated trouble; in their contract, the crown stipulated that no resident of the Indies was to interfere with the operation of their equipment (*yngenio*) under penalty of a large fine. The partners’ innovation failed to take hold along the Pearl Coast, like others before it. The promise of these mechanical approaches to harvesting underwater wealth was clearly no match for the existing system of exploited labor that prevailed along the Pearl Coast, in which residents were deeply invested and which produced profits.¹²

In spite of Pearl Coast residents’ rejection of crown-sponsored technologies intended to mechanize the central labor of pearl fishing, their attitude to imperial governance was not uniformly hostile. Communication between inhabitants and the crown reveal ambivalence and a willingness to turn to royal authority when it made sense to do so. In residents’ continual requests for concessions of all sorts—including permission to import everything from pitch and tar for the pearl-fishing boats to wine, cloth for clothing and sails, and enslaved Africans—they engaged with and reaffirmed the potential utility of the emerging overseas bureaucracy. Moreover, they cleverly manipulated the crown’s desire for pearl profits by requesting various types of tax exemptions in order to encourage investment for the discovery of new oyster banks and the preservation of the settlements. When it suited them to do so, residents located the pearl fisheries within a hierarchy of imperial possessions by claiming that pearl fishing entailed “more work and risk” than silver mining and thus deserved to be taxed less stringently.¹³

11. For Gómez de Acosta’s license and the reference to people who “understood” about pearl fishing, see “Real Cédula,” 1567, AGI, IG: 427, legajo 30, fols. 186v–187v: “Traer las demas personas q entienden a las dha. pesquería.”

12. For de Cabrera, de Lira, and de Luna’s grant, see “Capitulación,” 1568, AGI, IG: 425, legajo 24, fols. 424v–427v.

13. On at least one occasion, royal officials lauded residents who “unburdened their consciences” by paying overdue taxes on their harvested pearls, but more often than

Further evidence of the centrality of expertise to shaping hierarchies of wealth distribution in the Venezuelan pearl fisheries came to light in the 1570s, following the recovery of oyster banks near Margarita and the development of new pearling grounds near the small island of Coche. Crown-sponsored officials sent to observe and chronicle practices along the Pearl Coast created a series of reports that described an active and complex arena of resource exploitation and management. According to these reports, significant numbers of people and material resources were employed in the pursuit of pearls—many more, in fact, than those recorded during the fisheries’ heyday or suggested by renditions of a single pearl boat, no matter how big it was or how large the crew. One written account estimated that there were six thousand people doing business in the pearl fisheries; another estimated that twenty-one canoes were operating on Margarita, though the numbers occasionally rose to twenty-six or thirty, and between sixteen and eighteen at Rio de la Hacha. (The term *canoe* by the late sixteenth century referred to all the associated laborers and supplies as well as the boat; one observer described pearl-boat crews consisting of thirty black slaves—twenty-four divers, plus a crew of six “service” slaves—who provided the divers with food and water from a base on shore.) Although a Spanish overseer was supposed to accompany the divers to ensure that no tumult broke out in the boat (presumably because of competition for promising oyster reefs or harvested pearls), the reports suggest that these supervisory measures were followed in the breach and, even then, posed little threat to customary practices.¹⁴

Traders looking to exchange goods for pearls sought out the divers at sea (and their supply crew on land). One report claimed that many *piraguas* (or smaller boats) carrying provisions needed by the island settlements would travel from all over the mainland directly to “wherever they are fishing for pearls,” where they would trade “with the blacks of the canoes or the people who remained as guards in the settlement.” In considerable detail, these re-

not they complained about the crown being cheated of its due. See HNM, II, unpaid quintos, 1580, doc. 71, Gaspar de Peralta, 1580, doc. 68, license for a caravel, 1580, doc. 69, Peralta petition, 1581, doc. 73, Margarita requests merced, 1586, doc. 98, commerce with *indios aruacos*, 1588, doc. 117, wood from mainland, 1586, doc. 100, pearl fishing compared to silver mining, 1586, doc. 101, no seizure of pearl fishing materials, 1588, doc. 119.

14. HNM, II, pearl fishing to begin on Coche, 1575, doc. 15; Ricardo Ignacio Castillo Hidalgo, *Asentamiento español y articulación interétnica en Cumaná (1560–1620)* (Caracas, 2005), chap. 4; Report of Pedro Luys de Vargas y el tesorero Balthasar Perez Bernal, n.d., AGI, IG: 1805.

ports revealed a rich tapestry of actors who controlled the distribution of pearls in the fisheries, largely beyond the jurisdiction of royal officials. In these rough-and-tumble communities, power on land and expertise and knowledge at sea were intimately intertwined, and access to pearls was the source from which influence flowed.¹⁵

The reports in their entirety amounted to a single, critical lesson: living wealth lay at the heart of the region's profitability. The reports provided extensive detail on the habitats of the two central pillars of the region's economy, the divers and the oyster banks. The reports reaffirmed the divers' humanity even as they detailed the measures intended to limit their freedom. Furthermore, the reports outlined a volatile political economy in which an enslaved diver controlled access to a good whose value—contained in quantities so small they could easily fit into the palm of his hand—would, in theory, buy his freedom fifty times over (in reality, enslaved residents were prohibited from buying their liberty with pearls).

The crown visitors detailed the regimes intended to keep these highly skilled laborers in top physical form as well as the autonomy their skill afforded them. The reports noted that successful divers abstained from sex because it caused weight loss and also from excessive food, which inhibited their ability to hold their breath. Additionally, the observers also attempted to explicate (in surprisingly accurate terms) the process by which oysters reproduced and (less accurately) that by which pearls were created. The observers focused most of their attention, however, on the difficulties of controlling the circulation, taxation, and use of pearls in the fisheries. Of particular concern was enslaved divers' control over the pearls they harvested and the jewel's rampant circulation throughout the region. Pearls circulated "dizzily from hand to hand," the Spanish visitors wrote, and the slaves themselves "spend [pearls] and distribute them casually," using them to obtain "what is necessary for their houses and haciendas from merchants." Just a few pearls could make an enterprising resident—free or enslaved—a fortune: one report estimated that a small packet "the size of 4 fingers" could carry pearls worth one thousand *ducados* (ducats). When an enslaved African man could be sold for twenty-four ducados, this sum was a fortune. To put these sums in perspective, a contemporary account of pearl profits in the Caribbean fisheries at the turn of the century claimed that a pearl canoe operated by a particularly

15. Another report in AGI, IG: 1805, by Francisco Freile de Zamora, n.d., gives different estimates about how far out to sea the pearl canoes went in search of oysters as well as a description of how the oysters reproduced (quotation on [3]).

talented crew could harvest pearls worth three hundred ducados in a week, and a less-adept boat, two hundred ducados a week. A three-carat pearl was worth more than fourteen pesos, or nearly seventeen ducados. The destabilizing abundance of pearls and the way in which they concentrated economic power and conveyed political power to those who held them—enslaved or free—upended social hierarchies and underscored the inadequacy of numerical appraisals of value in the fisheries.¹⁶

The officials' reports confirmed that the production and harvesting of pearls shaped the infrastructure and social dynamics of the settlements far more than crown initiative. Spanish administrators residing on the Pearl Coast were among the targets of the observers' criticism. Charged with upholding royal directives, their own investment in pearls and pearl-fishing operations (including canoes and enslaved divers) led them to embrace the innovations that these settlements demanded, such as arming their enslaved crews in order to compete with rival pearl-fishing crews as well as to fend off corsairs. They further exploited their privilege to secure enslaved divers for their own pearl-fishing operations. Portuguese slave traders accused one Margarita governor in the late 1580s of defrauding them in his purchase of slaves from the "rivers of Guinea"; they cursed him as a heretic and lamented that they had not gone "to Guinea in order to bring blacks to the devil." The same governor came under fire for permitting excessive interaction between "the blacks he has for pearls" and the Indians in his employ. Just as in Seville, where the sight of black women wearing strands of pearls threatened perceived hierarchies of color among subjects, the reality of life on the Pearl Coast made a mockery of rules and regulations: the governor's accuser said that such permissiveness was "like making a free person slave and the slave free because the blacks that are captives command the Indians that are free." Once again, pearls were associated with topsy-turvy pairings of opposite elements; the best pearls circulated with the least powerful subjects *de jure*, who were simultaneously the region's *de facto* most powerful residents. The free

16. Report of Pedro Luis de Vargas y el tesorero Balthasar Perez Bernal, n.d., AGI, IG: 1805. For the price of an enslaved African man, see HNM, II, Alvaro Mendez de Castro, 1589, doc. 121. For comparative boat hauls, see AGI, IG: 1805, which contains a report labeled "Memorial ansi de la cria de las perlas en la concha como de la manera de pescarlas y beneficiarlas y de los generos que dellas ay del precio y balr de cada onza del genero," received in 1578 (the only report with a date contained within this file). The report suggests a wonder at "natural" powers, of the oyster, the sea, and the black slaves. For units of currency and their equivalencies, I am following Kris E. Lane, *Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas, 1500–1750* (Armonk, N.Y., 1998), 31.

mixed with the unfree, the African and indigenous residents of the coast reversed roles, and Europeans were left at their mercy.¹⁷

However shambolic they appeared in the eyes of the crown, these unruly settlements continued to provide profits and prompt investment. In 1581, the crown received 1,908 *marcos* of pearls (approximately 950 pounds of the jewel) from Margarita and 2,015 *marcos* (more than 1,000 pounds) in 1587. The pearl *quinto* from the fisheries near Río de la Hacha were not as grand but still significant, delivering 248 *marcos* (roughly 120 pounds of pearls) in 1581 and 878 *marcos* (nearly 450 pounds) in 1587. These immense pearl harvests recalled Cubagua's heyday some sixty years earlier, in which the small island sent more than 600 pounds of pearls to the crown in a single year. A cycle of smaller booms and larger busts—as measured by the *quinto*—would continue for the rest of the century.¹⁸

What kinds of investment and hardship went into the rising *quinto* shipments of pearls in the last few decades of the century? These renewed pearl harvests required more than just new oyster banks or the recovery of exhausted ones. The political ecology of the region, as inhabitants had long known, was a more complex affair, depending on a delicate balance of cultivation and exploitation. A half century of protective measures intended to prevent the ill-treatment of the Indies' indigenous inhabitants and continuing crown attempts to sponsor pearl diving did little to alter prevailing patterns of human and natural resource management in the fisheries. An official *visita* (inspection) in 1570 to the Cabo de la Vela settlements produced horrifying tales of the enslavement and abuse of indigenous pearl divers whose uprooted lives and suffering made possible the fisheries' survival. A woman identified as Inesica, or "little Ines," testified that she had been brought to the fisheries as a small girl; all she could remember of her journey from the Valley of Upar (present-day Valledupar, Colombia) to the fisheries was that she cried a great deal along the way. Women and men recounted dreadful beatings and privations, and a man named Dominguito affirmed that he said the

17. "Memoria de las cossas que don Luis de Rojas governador por su magd de la governacion de Veneçuela y su muger e hijo deon Juan de Rojas an hecho en la dha governacion," circa 1587, AGI, SD: 203, ramo 1, no. 32, fols. 19–30 (my thanks to David Wheat for bringing this document to my attention). See HNM, II, "Título de tesorero para el dicho Juan de Vargas Marques," 1579, doc. 64, item XLIII, prohibits royal customs officials (the *contador*, *factor*, and *veedor*, or accountant, factor, and inspector) from conducting pearl fishing.

18. R. A. Donkin offers these figures in *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia, 1998), 325.

Christian catechism at night for his soul and that all pearl divers prayed because they were "losing their souls beneath the water." This *visita* testimony might not have circulated widely, but, coming in the wake of the publication of Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies* in 1552, it likely sharpened royal concerns about the pearl fisheries while doing little to ameliorate the lives of those who suffered in them.¹⁹

The desire for laborers for these settlements sustained a wide-ranging slave trade. Spaniards supplied materials for (ever-larger) pearl canoes from Spain, while "Indians from Brazil" and "blacks from Guinea" continued to be brought to the Pearl Coast by various bearers.²⁰ By the 1570s, 1580s, and 1590s, canoe owners repeatedly justified their requests for goods necessary for the "sustenance of the blacks" by claiming that these residents were absolutely essential to the settlements' survival. Brought to the Pearl Coast from Iberia or, increasingly, directly from Africa and delivered legally or illegally by Spanish or Portuguese contractors (or contrabandists), these enslaved Africans were identified in the last three decades of the sixteenth century as being from the "Rivers of Guinea" or Cape Verde.²¹

The Flemish author of a 1590s travelogue about the Gold Coast of Guinea,

19. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies with Related Texts*, ed. Franklin W. Knight, trans. Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis, Ind., 2003), esp. 62–64. The testimony of various indigenous pearl divers of diverse origin is quoted and discussed in Barrera Monroy, "Los esclavos de las perlas," *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico*, XXXIX, no. 61 (2002), 3–33 (quotation on 24). Complaints about the treatment of Indians in the fisheries at Río de la Hacha on the Guajira Peninsula generated a royal *visita* in 1540. A major investigation into the ill-treatment of Indians in the pearl fisheries at Río de la Hacha followed in the mid-1560s; see "Tratos a los indios," 1564, AGI, Patronato Real: 195, ramo 27. A second *visita* to Cabo de la Vela took place in 1570 (Barrera Monroy, "Los esclavos de las perlas," *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico*, XXXIX, no. 61 [2002], 3–33, esp. testimony on 13, 18, 23).

20. On the changing contours of the transatlantic slave trade to the Spanish Americas, see David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1640* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016). For "blacks from Guinea" working alongside "Indians from Brazil," see HNM, II, "Bernardo Ramírez: Al gobernador de la Isla Margarita . . .," doc. 147. For the prices of slaves from Cabo Verde and Guinea sold on Margarita, see HNM, II, "La acordada de factores . . .," doc. 121.

21. AGI, AC: 2, legajo 1, fols. 81r–81v (Mar. 27, 1584). For petitions to supply fisheries (including "clothing for the blacks"), see AGI, AC: 2, legajo 1, fols. 67r–68v (Feb. 15, 1580), legajo 1, fols. 71r–71v (May 1, 1580). The town's general representative complained that, without supplies from Spain, the canoes could not go out in search of pearls: AGI, AC: 2, legajo 2, fol. 177v (Feb. 13, 1598).

Pieter de Marees, suggested that the region was known for its swimmers and divers and that many were sent to the Pearl Coast:

As it is customary for children, from their earliest youth onwards, to spend their time in the water every day, girls as well as boys . . . the Inhabitants here, especially those living in the coastal towns, are very good Swimmers. . . . They are very fast swimmers and can keep themselves under water for a long time. They can dive amazingly far, no less deep, and can see under water. Because they are so good at swimming and diving, they are specially kept for that purpose in many Countries and employed in this capacity where there is a need for them, such as on the Island of St. Margaret in the West Indies, where Pearls are found and brought up from the bottom [sea-bed] by Divers, as is more elaborately told in the Histories written about that subject.

De Marees also raised the possibility that it was these laborers — as well as the pearls they harvested — that linked the global Iberian world from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean: “In the East Indies too, in places such as Goa and Ormus, where they dive no less than 20 fathoms deep into the salt water in order to bring up from below fresh water which the people drink because it is free of certain diseases and Worms, they often use Negroes or blacks for this purpose on account of their great expertise in swimming and diving” (see Figure 7). Once again, the notion of expertise was invoked to justify the role played by certain types of subjects in certain types of labor.²²

A glimpse of what the laboring reality on the Pearl Coast looked like is offered by one artist’s rendition of a large pearl-fishing boat in the 1590s (Figure 8). By the end of the century, it was not uncommon for African crews to sail the increasingly large pearl-fishing vessels — capable of carrying between eighteen and twenty men — with minimal or no white supervision. The illustration reveals that the name “pearl canoe,” with its connotations (in English, at least) of small size, was highly misleading. Perhaps most interesting about this depiction of a pearl boat is the absence of a white overseer. An account by French explorer Samuel Champlain, who traveled through the region at the end of the 1590s, echoes the image in certain ways. Champlain described Margarita as “very fertile in corn and fruits” and possessing a large pearl-fishing fleet:

22. Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea* (1602), ed. and trans. Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford, 1987), 186–187.

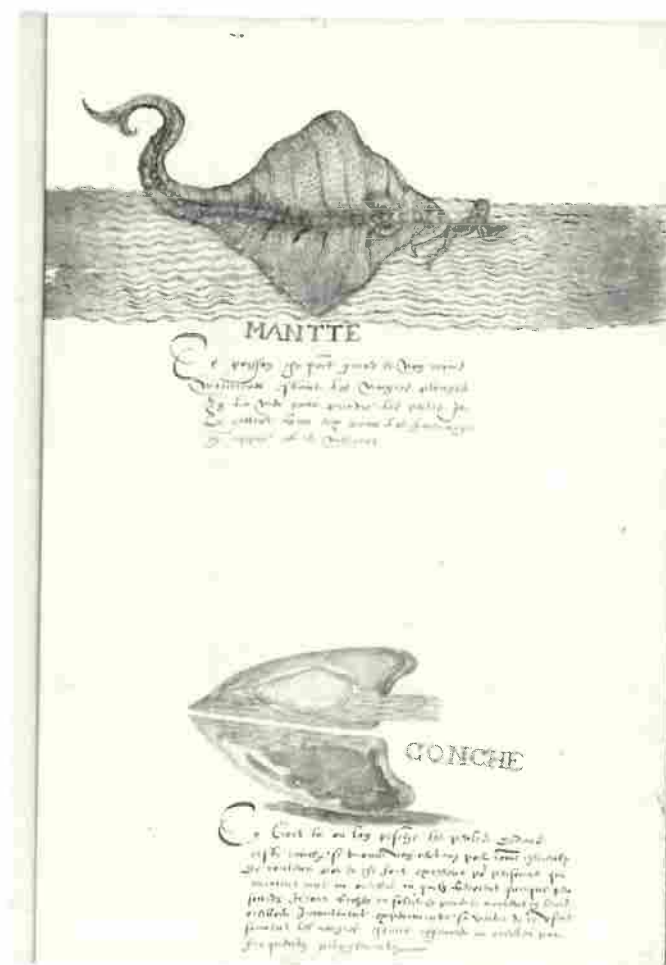


Figure 7. “Mantte” and “Conche.” From “*Histoire naturelle des Indes*” (circa 1586), fol. 47r. The Morgan Library and Museum. MA 3900. Bequest of Clara S. Peck, 1983.

The “*Histoire naturelle des Indes*” is an anonymous guide to the New World and is known as the Drake Manuscript. It was likely composed by a French Huguenot traveling with Francis Drake in the 1590s. The translation of the accompanying text of the illustration is: Mantte: “This fish is very large and no less vicious. When the negroes dive in the sea for pearls it jumps on them to make them drown and afterwards eats them”; Conche: “It grows where one fishes for pearls. In this conch is found a certain hair like human hair the color of gold and it is very excellent for people who have an earache or who are somewhat deaf. They dry it in the sun and then put it in their ears and immediately feel its benefit. The negroes often use it, their ears being hurt by frequent dives.” See the Morgan Library and Museum, <http://www.themorgan.org/collection/Histoire-Naturelle-des-Indes/47#overlay-context=collection/Histoire-Naturelle-des-Indes/47>.

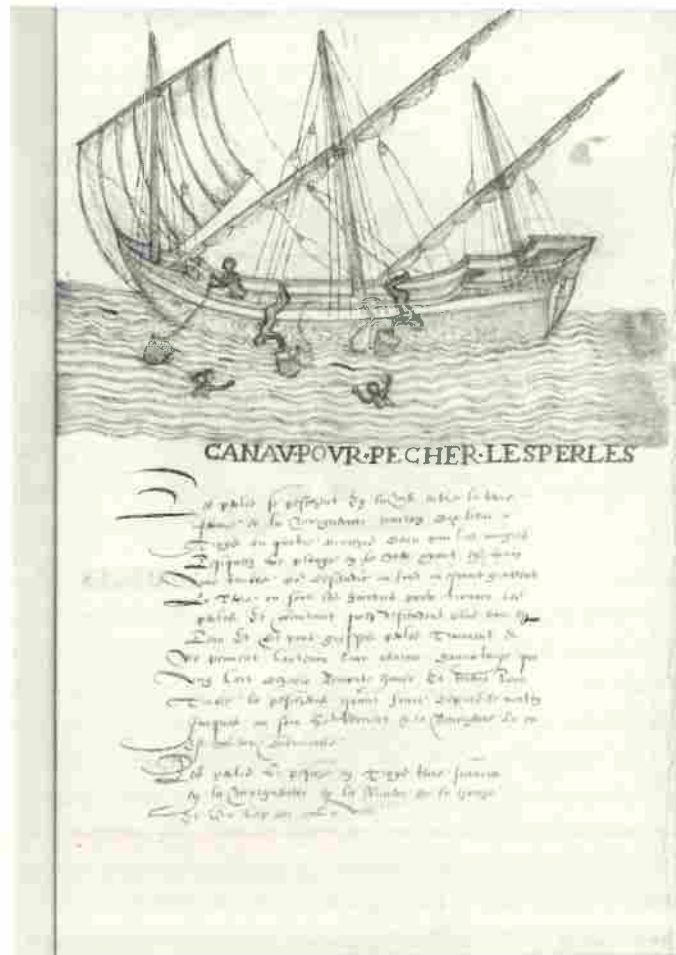


Figure 8. Pearl-Fishing Canoe with Black Divers.

From "Histoire naturelle des Indes" (circa 1586), fol. 57. The Morgan Library and Museum. MA 3900. Bequest of Clara S. Peck, 1983.

The translation of the accompanying text is: "Canoe for Pearl-Fishing:

Pearls are being fished in the ocean between the main-land and Isla de Margarita, approximately ten leagues, in three or four fathoms of water by the negroes who dive into the sea, holding a hoop-net to descend to the bottom where they scrape the soil where the oysters are, in order to find the pearls. And the deeper they descend in the water, the larger are the pearls they find. Not being able to hold their breath longer than a quarter of an hour, they come up again and pull their hoop-net. The fishing from morning to evening having been completed, they return to La Rancheria where they live. Pearls are being fished in three places, namely, on Isla de Margarita, in Riohacha, and at the Cabo de la Vela." See Patrick O'Brian et al., eds., *Histoire Naturelle des Indes: The Drake Manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library* (New York, 1996).

Every day more than three hundred canoes leave the harbour of the said town, which go about a league to sea to fish for pearls, in ten or twelve fathoms water. The said fishing is done by negroes, slaves of the king of Spain, who take a little basket under their arm, and with it plunge to the bottom of the sea, and fill it with ostrormes [meaning unclear], which resemble oysters; then go up again into their canoes, and return to the port to discharge them, in a spot designed for that purpose, when the officers of the king of Spain receive them.

Champlain was clearly impressed by the size of the fishing fleet, and his description also seems to contain a sense of admiration for the efficacy of the divers and their system of gathering oysters in baskets. He makes no mention of Spanish overseers in the pearl-fishing boats — indeed, he casually refers to the canoes as belonging to the divers ("their canoes"). Implicitly, Champlain describes a labor regime in which enslaved divers operated independently at sea, with Spanish royal authority coming back into view on shore in the figure of the "officers of the king of Spain."²³

In practice, pearl distribution did not function so smoothly, with the pearls delivered directly by the divers to waiting Spanish officials. In the American pearl fisheries, life was a jumble, with indiscriminate mixing of people and pearls. The royal response was to seek to reorder the settlements, mandating discrete categories of pearls and discrete responsibilities for each type of subject, but vernacular practices of wealth cultivation and distribution prevailed. Royal officials contributed to these alternate practices by being absent from the fisheries at critical moments, such as when oysters were brought ashore from the pearl-fishing boats and disappeared into private hands and houses. In response, the crown mandated that the officials be present in the fisheries for the duration of the pearl-harvesting season to ensure that the oysters were brought ashore "without opening or hiding any" and delivered to the officially designated locales. Once deposited in these safe houses, officials would keep careful watch over workers who were to open the shells. Even the punishments for breeches of these laws emphasized the importance of these distinctions, varying in severity depending on the identity of the perpetrators. Categories of people, as of pearls, proliferated in the New World. As with pearls, these categories of subjects served as a guide to measuring their

23. Samuel Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599–1602, with Maps and Illustrations*, ed. Norton Shaw, trans. Alice Wilmere (London, 1859), 7.

worth when it came to punishing transgressions. A canoe foreman (*canoero*) or diver who was “black, mulatto, or Indian” who opened shells anywhere other than the officially designated storehouse was to receive two hundred lashes and serve ten years laboring in the galleys. If the accused was Spanish or mestizo, the punishment was one hundred lashes and the forfeiture of all goods. Repeat offenders were to be given two hundred lashes and sent to labor in the galleys for life.²⁴

The movement of pearls pointed to the failures of attempts at categorization and specialization. Whether in Europe or in the Americas, the private nature of pearl movement drew attention to the degree to which people evaded imperial control, making independent judgments not only about the value of the pearls concerned but also about the alliances and networks that gave order and meaning to their lives. In the Caribbean pearl fisheries, there was nobody more essential to the circulation of pearls than the divers themselves. Their centrality to the region’s identity gave them a degree of power over the circulation of the jewel that the crown sought in vain to arrest. As report after report from the Pearl Coast attests, enslaved divers escaped frequently, colluded with neighboring Indians as well as foreign corsairs, socialized with nonenslaved residents of the fisheries, and to a large degree controlled the distribution of the pearls they harvested. Crown decrees concerning these problematic subjects oscillated between attempts to ameliorate their working and living conditions and measures designed to reduce their influence and autonomy in the settlements. Some of these measures were common throughout Spain’s New World holdings, such as the 1570 royal injunction that settlers were not to bring married slaves from Iberia without also bringing their wives and children. But others reflected more precisely the reality of the Pearl Coast, such as the lengthy 1579 decree that sought to tighten the administrative infrastructure (as well as the physical structure) of these settlements.²⁵

It was this promiscuity of people and pearls, this chaotic intermingling, that posed a source of great concern to the crown. The 1579 decree overwhelmingly emphasized containment, of people as well as of the jewel. Pearls were to be categorized and taxed according to quality and type, the imperfect prototype for processing pearls that was first put into place earlier in the

24. HNM, II, “Título de tesorero,” doc. 64, items XXI–XXIX, deal with various aspects of procedures in the pearl fisheries.

25. The documentary collections (*Cedularios*) compiled by Enrique Otte are full of accounts of the difficulties that characterized the pearl fisheries. See, for example, CC, II.

century. Royal observers singled out practices that challenged crown prerogative, such as drilling pearls (which was forbidden) and, in a noteworthy linguistic recognition of the related anxieties between the mixing of subjects and the mixing of objects, “marrying” pearls of different categories by stringing together mismatched varieties. The precision and efficacy of these qualitative categories (such as *granzones*, or “big grains,” and *amarillas redondas*, or “yellow round ones,” among others) were variable and subject to rampant fraud. Once categorized, pearls were then to be further contained, placed in elaborate locked boxes and stored in “strong houses” to be built by “Indians and slaves,” spaces in which residents (and pearls) could take refuge from corsairs. In spite of these measures, the movement of pearls and people in these settlements defied regulation. Pearls moved according to locally determined imperatives, whether in negotiations at sea, among traders from the mainland and enslaved pearl canoe operators, or on shore as the fisheries’ motley residents forged the de facto boundaries of their community.²⁶

Observers of the fisheries in the late 1570s and 1580s also provided a window onto the enduring relationship between vernacular practices, language, and the contextual worth of pearls. Although there seems to have been a general consensus on which pearls were the best (the largest, the whitest), the worth of any particular pearl was determined in the moment by the person in a position to do the evaluating—whether it was the enslaved diver opening the shells in the fishing boat or the buyer and seller determining the worth of a pearl versus a piece of meat in a store in Caracas. The names for different types of pearls in circulation illustrates the relationship between the worth

26. HNM, II, “Título de tesorero,” doc. 64, item XXIII: on separating the pearls into their proper categories and giving the best fifth to the crown; item LVII: on the need for security houses to protect “indios y esclavos” from being robbed by corsairs and to dissuade them from coming. In this case, the terms “indios” and “esclavos” are used as though the two categories do not overlap. Francis Drake’s 1585–1586 raids on Cartagena and Santo Domingo are among the most famous of these plunder-driven missions, but there were many more—not just on major cities but also on Spanish treasure ships, island fishing settlements, and regional pearl storage warehouses. See AGI, Audiencia de Panamá: 30, no. 16 (Apr. 15, 1577). This letter to Philip II from residents of Panama clearly states the level of threat that the *cimarrón* communities of escaped slaves posed to the fisheries. See Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 330; Lane, *Pillaging the Empire*, 41–43. The interplay among English privateers, African pearl divers, and Spanish pearl-fishery operators and slaveowners is also discussed briefly in John K. Thornton and Linda M. Heywood, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007), 6.

of pearls and their social context within the local political economy. In the fisheries, networks of production were intimately linked to networks of distribution, and subjective judgment was an essential ingredient in assessing a pearl's value.

The vocabulary of pearl use and circulation also reflected practices in the fisheries, those that were unremarkable and those that were deeply challenging. While the term *ave maría*, for example, referred to pearls suitable for rosaries, other terms reflected practices elaborated by the enslaved divers. One report described as customary the practice that every Sunday the "blacks of the canoe" gave to the overseer and captain of their canoe "two or three marcos" (or between a pound and a pound and a half) of pearls for the canoe owner. This generated the name *topos domingueros*, or "Sunday pearls." *Topos* was one of eight categories into which double-washed pearls were to be separated by enslaved divers, who, according to one observer, would sit in a circle around the oysters they gathered, opening them and placing them in conch shells while supervised by a Spanish overseer. Pearls of seven to eight carats were the most valuable, "the biggest to be taken out of the sea in our time," and were worth more than four hundred ducados. If a pearl that size had a mate (a match), then the two were worth more than fifteen hundred ducados. Those of least value were to be given to pharmacists for medicinal use. Of these various and valuable specimens, the report's author noted that the slaves managed to keep the best pearls for themselves.²⁷

The most worrisome of the vernacular practices chronicled by these official reporters were the remarkable auctions called *caconas* (a word that came to be used to refer to the highest-quality pearls), a type of distribution network that defied crown channels. Once or twice a month, "depending on how the fishery is doing," a boat owner would call all the enslaved divers to his house. There he would display an array of goods ranging from imported clothing and shoes to wine and cards and tell the gathered divers to take whatever they most desired. In return, he would ask for all the pearls that the divers had retained for themselves over the previous two weeks or so, "which experiences shows are the best." According to the author, the pearls gathered from this *cacona* were often "worth more than the fishery [haul] of twenty or thirty days." He concluded that the pearls obtained from the *cacona* were

27. For the report, see AGI, IG: 1805, fol. 3 (circa 1590). Jane E. Mangan cites the term *topo* as meaning "dress pins" in late-sixteenth-century Peru in "Moving Mestizos in Sixteenth-Century Peru: Spanish Fathers, Indigenous Mothers, and the Children in Between," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., LXX (2013), 292.

"the principal source of profit of the lords of the canoe because they are best and most oriental that are extracted."²⁸

What is striking about the *caconas* is not so much the relatively common colonial practice of masters' offering inducements to their enslaved laborers but the subjectivity and range of the value given to pearls that they revealed. Moreover, the *cacona*, characterized by one author as an "Indian word, from when the Spaniards bartered with them just as they now do with the blacks of the canoes," also stands as a fascinating example of how indigenous vocabularies (and perhaps customs) evolved in the changing circumstances of early colonialism. Pearls were the heart of the region's economy, and the divers were the indispensable skilled laborers who produced them and shaped their circulation at the most critical moment, immediately after they were harvested. It is unsurprising that they used this power to keep the best pearls for themselves, dispensing them via the *cacona* in exchange for other sundry items.

In this context, the crown yet again sponsored a device (seemingly a type of dredge, invented by one Domingo Bartolomé and named the *tartana*) that promised to do away with the labor of pearl fishing; indeed, it explicitly promised that it would replace black divers. The device failed. Cuba-gua's residents insisted that no machine could manage this natural resource as skillfully as their enslaved divers did. Perhaps they were reluctant to cede the power that this volatile labor system allowed them; an enslaved labor force that they nominally controlled was an instrument for maintaining some independence from a royal bureaucracy.²⁹

In spite of the continual exclamations about the unregulated flow of pearls within the fisheries, there also existed a recognition among local officials that, in the absence not only of basic goods but also the specie to procure them, pearls were needed as a medium of exchange. In the 1580s, officials in Caracas noted that pearls were the obvious choice to facilitate and enable basic commerce, "especially for the purchase of food items and clothing" in the region. The municipal council noted that the lack of minted money or gold was the source of much suffering and want "among rich and poor" in the city

28. For a description of the *cacona*, see AGI, IG: 1805, fols. 4–5 (circa 1590). Eduardo Barrera Monroy offers a transcription of this particular report in "Los esclavos de las perlas," *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico*, XXXIX, no. 61 (2002), 3–33.

29. On Bartolomé, see HNM, II, docs. 149–152. See also *CMNAC*, I, 218–221 (June 29, 1592). His device is also discussed in Manuel Luengo Muñoz, "Inventos para acrecentar la obtención de perlas en América durante el siglo XVI," *Anuario de estudios Americanos*, IX (1952), 68–72.

and inland, a situation that might be remedied by “dealing and contracting with pearls, the item of which there is most.” The council’s directive stands as an unusually explicit recognition of the potential benefits (as opposed to the costs to the settlements’ social and economic order) to be had from pearls’ abundance. Because the jewel was so accessible, pearls could ease the hardships caused by the lack of specie experienced by rich and poor alike.³⁰

The subjective nature of pearls’ appeal, however, made it very difficult to regulate their use as an official form of payment. In 1589, the governing council of the city of Caracas acknowledged the frequency with which inhabitants used pearls as cash and appointed a committee to consider the worth of certain quantities and qualities of the jewel. Pearls’ viability as currency was compromised by fluctuations in supply. In 1590, the pearl supply in the region spiked following the discovery of new oyster banks on the mainland, and the prices of pearls dropped in response, rendering previously fixed pearl currency ratios invalid. The council’s attempts to standardize the use of the jewel met with resistance: store owners refused to accept pearls as payment or requested greater numbers of them or better-quality specimens than the established ratios called for.³¹ In 1595, the council again ordered that pearls be accepted as payment “in the butcher’s shop just as in the rest of the grocery stores, taverns, and for other items that are sold often in small quantities, and in all other deals.” No one was to “dare to ask for more” than the established amount. Again, inhabitants resisted the council’s attempt to standardize the subjective judgments embedded in pearl transactions; they lamented that “some store keepers and bakers that sell bread will not and do not want

30. ACC, 99 (Sept. 9 1589): “Por no aver en esta çiudad y governaçion moneda acuñada, sino que en el comerçio de la tierra se trata con oro, y porque al presente en esta çiudad y su término no se saca oro, de cuya caussa en la república se padece nescçidad, así entre ricos como pobres, y que esta nesçessidad se podría evitar tratando y contratando con perlas, por ser género de que hay más cantidad, especialmente para el comerçio de la ciudad.”

31. After two days of debate, the council determined that the problems caused by the lack of specie were so acute that pearls were to be allowed to circulate as money in the province of Caracas “at the prices that circulate on Margarita.” The council determined that sixteen reales of pearls would be worth one *peso de oro fino* (peso of fine gold): ACC, 101 (Sept. 19, 1589). A year later, the council reaffirmed the decree to allow pearls to circulate as currency “as they do in Margarita and Cumana” and noted that these declared equivalencies were not always obeyed; the council sought to address the “many problems and debates and differences among the householders and residents regarding governance and inequality in payments” (ACC, 142 [Mar. 23, 1590]).

to receive pearls [as payment].” Perhaps in an effort to allay merchants’ fear of fraud, the council ordered that a silversmith make precise pearl-measuring weights to be distributed to all small vendors throughout the city. This measure does not seem to have helped: a few years later, merchants continued to pick through the pearls offered them as payment and to choose the specimens they deemed superior, rather than accept payment by weight.³²

Similar problems plagued Margarita. Store owners would accept only a higher quality of pearls than the one legally deemed acceptable for payment, and black pearl divers hid “a great part” of the pearls they gathered—in addition to those they brought to the caconas—and used “the best and the most valuable” of them “to come and buy things to eat and other things they need.” These practices, vexatious though they were to crown officials, were central to the equilibrium that prevailed on the Pearl Coast.³³

Contained within the singular dominance of this one commodity—pearls—were ways of expressing the diversity of needs of the region’s inhabitants. Enslaved divers demanded their own concessions through the cacona, and Spaniards continued to sidestep the regulatory provisions intended to divert the best pearls to the crown. In 1591, Philip II once again noted the frequency with which pearls continued to evade the quinto and the amount of fraud perpetrated in the fisheries. The king blamed all residents of these settlements (“merchants, traders, contractors and all residents and inhabitants of the island and province”) for their complicity in depriving him of his due. He also remarked on the continuing failure to sort pearls into their designated categories and the tendency to place them “all in confusion and together.”³⁴

At the close of the sixteenth century, enslaved pearl divers had successfully carved out private lives beyond the fisheries and took advantage of any opportunity to pursue their own interests. Royal officials in Cumaná, on the mainland, complained that a new law prohibiting Indians from fishing for pearls “of their own free will and for payment” had the effect of making the black slaves (“those lazy bastards”) unwilling to work as well, preferring instead

32. The full quote fixes “11 grains of *rostrillo* (a lesser-quality type of pearl) for every real, up to the quantity of half a peso . . . in the butcher’s shop just as in the rest of the grocery stores, taverns, and for other items that are sold often in small quantities, and in all other deals,” and that no one “dare to ask for more than 16 reales per peso.” See ACC, I, 398 (Jan. 7, 1595), 400 (Feb. 6, 1595).

33. AGI, IG: 1805.

34. CMNAC, I, 179, 180 (May 18, 1591).

to “tend their gardens and plantings and spend time with black women.” In 1600, the crown again complained, noting the “games” and “raffles” of pearls that went on among the crews of the pearl-fishing boats. The crown sought to outlaw transactions between the boats’ crews and slaveowners, who, the crown alleged, invented reasons to spend time near the boats, where they demanded their “caconas and pearls” and traded for valuable pearls with *negros ajenos*, or black divers in other peoples’ employ. In spite of these complaints, that same year the crown recognized the centrality of the enslaved divers to the region’s identity and their role within the imperial political economy by placing them in the center of the coat of arms the king granted the island of Margarita in 1600 (Figure 9). The king described the coat of arms as a shield with a partially blue background, “with a canoe in the middle and the blacks of the fishery, and on the bottom the depths of the sea . . . and on top of the said shield a crown, from which a pearl is suspended.”³⁵

Enslaved Africans and the pearls they harvested posed continual challenges to imperial control, yet they were also critical symbols and sources of the natural and human wealth of the empire’s overseas domains. Margarita’s coat of arms stands as yet another attempt by the crown to subsume a deeply challenging set of social and economic relations and place them—through a visual metaphor of political power—under the aegis of the crown.

Promiscuous Circulation of Pearls and People

As the Iberian crown struggled to impose order on the circulation of people and products within and beyond the fisheries, Spain and Portugal’s rivals looked upon pearls and the settlements that produced them as potent symbols of what maritime empire could bring, both extraordinary wealth and wanton destruction. Pearls were embedded in narratives of maritime expansion, their complex multiple associations evidenced in art and writing alongside imperial initiatives to establish pearl-fishing operations around the globe.

35. AGI, SD: 190, 1590–1690; HNM, II, “New (old) decree, 1600,” doc. 226 (this decree refers to the lengthy 1591 decree and laments that many of the same activities are still occurring); *CMNAC*, I, 301 (Nov. 30, 1599), 322 (Nov. 27, 1600): “y por la presente hago merçed a la dicha çiudad de la Asumpçion de la dicha isla Margarita de que agora y de aquí adelante aya y tenga por sus armas un escudo, la mitad del campo açul, con una canoa en medio y los negros de la pesquería, y en el hueco hondas de mar, y en lo alto del escudo a los dos lados dél San Felís y San Adaut, que son avogados de la dicha çiudad, y ençima del dicho escudo una corona, de la qual penda una perla que llegue hasta el campo azul, y por los lados unas letras que digan Sicut Margarita preçiosa, segund ba pintado en esta escudo, las quales doy a la dicha çiudad de la Asumpçion por sus armas.”



Figure 9. A Modern Rendition of the Coat of Arms Granted in 1600 to Margarita. Held in the Museo de Nueva Cádiz en Asunción, Margarita. Photograph by Molly A. Warsh



Figure 10. Elizabeth I, 1533–1603 (the “Armada Portrait”). Circa 1588. Oil on oak panel, 1,105 mm. x 1,270 mm. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

In the 1570s, French essayist Michel de Montaigne reflected on pearls as symbolic of the avarice and destruction that characterized accounts of the Americas. Pairing the jewel with a popular spice as chief motivators of the destructive encounters that Columbus’s fateful trip engendered, he wrote: “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!” He was far from unusual in singling out the jewel as a symbol of the violence and glory of maritime empire. Pearls similarly evoked wealth, power, and violence in Elizabeth I’s “Armada Portrait,” painted shortly after England’s defeat of Spain, in which the victorious monarch, situated against a backdrop of the naval battle, her hand jauntily perched on a globe she promises to dominate, is adorned in a headdress and ropes of the jewel (Figure 10). The portrait was painted in the wake of Sir Francis Drake’s raids on Caribbean settlements, many of which

produced pearls for the queen.³⁶ Drake was hardly the only source of pearls in England. Fellow privateer John Hawkins promised pearls to the queen from his raids in the 1560s; ship captains sold them to jewelers; royal jewelers bought them from individuals in a variety of conditions; and a prominent London goldsmith and the jeweler to Queen Elizabeth employed a ne’er-do-well West Country agent to supply him with pearls purchased from prize ships brought into West Country ports.³⁷

Pearls’ symbolic potency as emblems of maritime prowess was invoked in the jewel Elizabeth I gave to Francis Drake in recognition of his services to the crown in the late 1580s. The so-called Drake Jewel suggests that it was not pearls and pepper—as Montaigne suggested—that people thought of when empire came to mind; rather, it was pearls and enslaved Africans, at least in an Atlantic context. The pendant contains an image of the queen with her symbol, the falcon, on one side, and, on the reverse, the image of a black slave.³⁸

36. Michel de Montaigne, “Of Coaches,” in Donald M. Frame, trans., *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, Calif., 1958), 695. For a receipt of pearls delivered by Drake, see SP 46/17, fol. 198, TNA. As hostilities resumed between England and Spain in 1585, Spanish settlements in the Indies endured seventy-six different hostile expeditions by Elizabethan privateers over the next two decades. The surge of assaults against Spain’s settlements and treasure ships, spearheaded by English West Country slave traders and privateers such as John Hawkins and Francis Drake, included devastating attacks on Cartagena. See Lane, *Pillaging the Empire*, 49.

37. Hawkins’s 1567 letter to Elizabeth promising pearls is in SP 12/44, fol. 16, TNA. For a ship captain selling pearls to a jeweler in 1594, see Additional Manuscripts 14027, TNA. For examples of similar purchases of pearls by Spanish royal jewelers, see AGI, Contaduría: 196A, 1561–1649, no. 1, “Real Cédula” (Apr. 24, 1576), no. 2, “Real Cédula” (Feb. 24, 1578); AGI, IG: 426, legajo 26, fols. 125v (Oct. 6, 1578), 132v–133r (Nov. 10, 1578), IG: 739, no. 208 (Aug. 16, 1579), no. 371 (Oct. 7, 1581), IG: 740, no. 32 (Mar. 24, 1582); AGI, Contaduría: 5, nos. 1–3, “Perlas, esmeraldas y otras cosas que se entregaron al guardajoyas de Su Majestad,” 1584–1597; Lane, *Pillaging the Empire*, 33–35, 49–50. These privateering hauls were quite lucrative: between 1585 and 1604, the annual value of goods (pearls among them) brought back to England from the Spanish Main by privateers was one hundred thousand pounds. See Philip D. Morgan, “Virginia’s Other Prototype: The Caribbean,” in Peter C. Mancall, ed., *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550–1624* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007), 349. For more on the port agent, see Molly A. Warsh, “Pearls and Plunder: The West Country Contact of a Jeweller to Queen Elizabeth,” *Jewellery History Today*, no. 7 (February 2010), 5–6.

38. For the image of the Drake Jewel, see H. Clifford Smith, *Jewellery* (London, 1908), plate 34. On the jewel’s history, see David S. Shields, “The Drake Jewel,” *Uncommon Sense*, no. 118 (Spring 2004), <http://oieahc.wm.edu/uncommon/118/drake.cfm>.

If reflections on empire in art and prose employed pearls to evoke the violent complexities of maritime expansion, in practice pearls were used to shore up and maintain alliances amid the tumult caused by the era's shifting borders. Pearls, then, were associated not solely with destruction and dominance but also with custodianship—of both personal material wealth and also of ties among associates. Pearls reveal many different kinds of people debating in word and deed the question of how value (material and human) was to be assessed and regulated. These private political economies were simultaneously embedded within, and independent of, an imperial political economy that sought to monopolize wealth husbandry.

Though their calculations of risk and reward and the contours of their networks remain just beyond our view, we see traces of these alternate, intersecting economies in the records of individuals who shipped pearls on Spanish fleets from the Caribbean to varied recipients and destinations. For example, ships' registers documenting cargo leaving Santo Domingo in the 1550s include private shipments of pearls belonging to *particulares* (individuals), and the terse descriptions of these various pearl owners hint at an intricate and broad web of consumers. These records suggest that there was no fixed path along which pearls traveled. Perhaps some remained in the hands of the person recorded in the register, but some were destined for further distribution once they arrived in Europe. Even in the cases in which just the names or official titles of the owners are given—for example, “the king,” “the judges and officials,” and, remarkably, “the Bishop of Morocco”—we cannot know what these individuals intended to do with the pearls once they received them. The occasional vocational qualifiers of the pearls' owners (“the merchant brothers Diego and Alvaro Beltrán,” “the silversmith de Mendoça,” “the precious stone broker Francisco López”) suggest that the imported pearls would not linger in the possession of these men. On an even larger scale, Caribbean pearls continued to travel far beyond the Atlantic waters from which they were fished and the Iberian hubs that received them to Charles V's northern European allies: in 1549, the Fuggers bought ten thousand American pearls, and Flemish merchants obtained a new license to control the circulation of Cuban pearls under Charles V's son and successor Philip II.³⁹

A glimpse of one of the extra-imperial networks that delivered pearls throughout Spanish diplomatic networks appears in a peculiar 1567 case of customs evasion by Sephardic merchants at the London port of Gravesend.

39. “Registros de oro, plata y mercancías,” 1554–1556, AGI, IG: 1802; Hermann Kellenbenz, *Los Fuggers en España y Portugal hasta 1560* (Castilla y León, 2000), 496–497.

The extant trial testimony suggests that Margaret of Parma, the Spanish regent of the Netherlands, asked the Spanish ambassador to England, Diego de Guzmán de Silva, who had access to a network of Portuguese pearl merchants, to arrange for a shipment of pearls on behalf of herself and the duke of Alba, skirting customs duties and political sensitivities. Incomplete but tantalizing, the case illuminates the connections between private assessments of wealth and risk and larger political and commercial circuits.⁴⁰

The clandestine nature of the transaction likely reflected the tense political climate: the Spanish crown's 1557 bankruptcy and resulting tax increase in the Dutch provinces threw the Spanish Netherlands into turmoil. The conflict in the Netherlands coincided with mounting hostility between Spain and England throughout the 1560s as well as England's own commercial and political disputes with the Dutch. Antwerp merchants quarreled with the English officials over trading rights and customs duties. Meanwhile, the Spanish rulers of the Netherlands were increasingly irritated by the activities of English Channel pirates (such as those whose prize ships produced Venezuelan pearls for the crown) and the English government's interference with Spanish shipping.⁴¹

40. For the trial testimony, see E/133/1/84, TNA.

41. Ambassador Guzmán de Silva, the diplomat at the heart of the clandestine pearl trade, began his four-year tenure in London in the midst of these diplomatic wrangles. Just a few months before his arrival in London, the English Privy Council had closed all English ports to shipping from the Netherlands and imposed penalties on ships that violated the embargo. As soon as Guzmán de Silva assumed his post, he began negotiating an end to this embargo with Sir William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth's chief advisor and secretary of state, and trade was reopened on January 1, 1565. (These dealings likely confirmed his connections with major players in the commerce of both countries.) Nonetheless, economic and diplomatic problems continued to interfere with commerce between the two nations for the rest of Guzmán de Silva's tenure in England, and in 1569 tensions once again brought trade to a halt. In 1563, Spanish authorities in the Netherlands closed Low Country ports to English merchants, and merchants from the Netherlands were prohibited from exporting goods on English ships. These actions provoked retaliatory measures from England, many designed to hurt Antwerp's business market. On commercial problems between England and the Netherlands, see Vincent Ponko, Jr., “The Privy Council and the Spirit of Elizabethan Economic Management, 1558–1603,” *American Philosophical Society, Transactions*, New Ser., LVIII, no. 4 (1968), 1–63. Robert Brenner argues that this period of troubled commercial relations in the 1560s and 1570s led English merchants to break their reliance on Antwerp and to begin searching for their own direct access to Eastern goods. See Brenner, “The Social Basis of English Commercial Expansion, 1550–1650,” in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Merchant Networks in the Early Modern World*,

Given the strained relations between Antwerp merchants, Spanish bureaucrats, and English customs officials at the time of the pearls' seizure, it was the commercial and political connections at the heart of the deal, and the preeminence of private over official channels, that came under scrutiny when two Gravesend officials discovered the pearls.⁴² The questions asked of the merchants focused entirely on the networks responsible for moving the pearls from place to place. Court officials attempted to ascertain the precise nature of the transaction (for example, whether the pearls were being transported as merchandise or as a gift) as well as the geographic range of the participants in the affair and the logistics that enabled its execution. Witnesses were asked if they did "directly or indirectly speak and persuade" with customs officials in Plymouth or elsewhere, revealing an anxiety about sub-rosa circuits that undermined official channels. How many people had been privy to the deal, and for how long had it been planned? Had one of the merchant's connections to the Spanish ambassador enabled him to "make [frende] and labour to the Courte or to Any other place" with the goal of arranging further movement of the pearls? Had letters between Antwerp and England played an important role in arranging the deal, and, if so, who had served as couriers? Interrogating officials betrayed a pronounced concern about the permeability of the kingdom's borders and the power of extra-imperial networks that facilitated the movement of goods and people between realms.⁴³

How the case was resolved is unclear. That the merchants were of Por-

1450–1800 (Aldershot, U.K., 1996), 284. These troubles in Antwerp marked the beginning of the end of the city's commercial dominance.

42. Details about Ambassador Guzmán de Silva's life are not abundant, but before being named ambassador he was a cleric from Ciudad Rodrigo, associated with the archbishop of Toledo, Cardinal Don Juan Talavera. In 1563, the Spanish Council of State named him ambassador to England. The skill he employed in solving the problem of halted commerce between England and Flanders made this one of the most notable successes of his career. On Guzmán de Silva, see Manuel Fernández Álvarez, *Tres embajadores de Felipe II en Inglaterra* (Madrid, 1951), 137–139; and Michael J. Levin, *Agents of Empire: Spanish Ambassadors in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2005), 30–42. Guzmán de Silva—who would move to Venice as ambassador in 1571—served as ambassador in London from 1563 to 1567. On Guzmán de Silva's tenure in Venice, see Levin, *Agents of Empire*, 8, 30, 160–165, 190–196.

43. E/133/1/84, TNA. Where the pearls originated remained unclear and indeed appears to have been of no interest to the interrogators; given the parties involved and the contours of the pearl trade in the late sixteenth century, though, it is very likely they came from either Lisbon or Seville and were from either the East or the West Indian pearl fisheries.

tuguese origin—likely New Christian—heightened the intrigue around the case. Alongside a growing trend toward specialization among artisans, including those working with jewels, there was a perception that outsiders controlled the jewel trade. Many of Lisbon's and Seville's goldsmiths and lapidaries were of New Christian origin or foreign-born (often from non-Catholic lands to the north). Religious tension, combined with the natural intrigue generated by products of great monetary value, rendered suspect the gem trade and those who took part in it, as did the growing formal recognition of these artisans.⁴⁴

In Spain, royal recognition of silversmiths and goldsmiths as *artífices*, or artist-craftsmen (which implied a knowledge of science and the arts as opposed to mere mechanical mastery) was achieved in 1552 with an order by Charles V. Lisbon was also home to numerous specialists. By the mid-sixteenth century, a survey conducted at the behest of the archbishop of Lisbon (who wanted to chronicle the growth of the city) recorded at least 32 *lapidários*, or precious-stone dealers, and 430 goldsmiths, many of whom (if not most) likely also worked with precious stones of all types. In a 1566 petition, Lisbon's lapidaries requested royal recognition and regulation of their profession, and by 1572 they appeared as a separate category in Lisbon's official guide to the rules governing mechanical trades. Like the Sephardic network discovered at Gravesend, merchants' and jewelers' social and business networks often spanned contentious borders, and they employed a variety of strategies that enabled them to range widely and deal effectively with the risk and trust issues inherent to long-distance trade in highly valuable goods. Although merchant nations (as communities of foreign-born merchants living abroad were known) had long benefited from protected status in the cities in which they traded, as allegiances splintered throughout the sixteenth century the perception of these foreigners at the heart of the kingdom became more fraught. Foreign merchants became associated with external challenges to orthodoxy and sovereignty over the empire's wealth.⁴⁵

44. On immigration and industry, see Lien Bich Luu, "Aliens and Their Impact on Goldsmiths' Craft in London in the Sixteenth Century," in David Mitchell, ed., *Goldsmiths, Silversmiths, and Bankers: Innovation and the Transfer of Skill, 1550 to 1750* (London, 1995), 43–52.

45. Priscilla E. Muller, *Jewels in Spain, 1500–1800* (New York, 1972), 3–5. For more on merchant nations and the particular problems they faced in Iberia, see Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492–1640* (Oxford, 2007); Walter Grosshaupt, "Commercial Relations between Portugal and the Merchants of Augsburg and Nuremberg," in Jean Aubin, ed.,

Although the particular associations with foreigners and suspect religions likely intensified the anxiety surrounding the Gravesend case, it was not just jewelers and merchants who depended upon sub-rosa networks of allies and associates. No matter the origin of their erstwhile owner, pearls followed nearly ungovernable paths from market to owner and from owner to market again. Even the Spanish royal household continued to receive pearls through many channels. Arnão Vergel, the jeweler to Philip II's third wife, Isabel de Valois (from 1559 to her death in 1568), often mended humble pearl jewelry for assorted and frequently anonymous clients—pearls that had fallen off military epaulets, for example, or pearls that needed to be re-enameled or re-drilled. Vergel also purchased batches of pearls of undeclared provenance from a jeweler's assistant; on another occasion, he recorded his own purchase of a single *asiento* pearl that he must have needed for some item. Vergel did not bother to record the name of this seller of a single pearl. Once, a surnameless Santiago brought Vergel a relatively large pearl, weighing thirty carats, whose drilled hole had been blocked. (This particular pearl Vergel seems to have kept for his own use.) A pearl of uncertain origin and indeterminate value could, in a different setting, be incorporated with ease into an entirely new jewel, altering its worth and significance.⁴⁶

Pearls were a mobile and easily hidden source of cash, and their abundance and range of quality made them an ordinary, everyman's jewel. They could be reattached, restrung, and repurposed in any number of ways, their provenance erased as they were dropped into a pile alongside similar specimens. Pearls trickled through and around ports and markets on scales small and large, worth great sums and barely anything at all. They proved nearly impervious to royal regulation even as they commanded the monarchy's steady attention. Philip II corresponded regularly with royal officials both within Spain and beyond about the arrival and distribution of pearls. In 1576, in a letter that touched upon the arrival in Lisbon of unregistered pearls destined for Seville, the king ordered an inquiry into the merchant networks involved. Not only were Seville's officials to look into "the people with whom [the recipient of the pearls] does business," the king additionally requested a thorough investigation into smuggling in Lisbon, embedding pearls in a com-

La découverte, le Portugal et l'Europe (Paris, 1990), 362–383; Kellenbenz, *Los Fugger*, 496; and Eddy Stols, "Os mercadores flamengos em Portugal e no Brasil antes das conquistas holandesas," *Anais de história*, no. 5 (1973), 9–54.

46. AGS, Inventario no. 39, Sección X: Casa Real, Obras, y Bosques, "Cuentas de Arnão Vergel, platero de oro," fols. 1–107.

plex world of illicit commercial dealings. Much like the interrogators in the case of pearl smuggling in London a decade earlier, Philip II wanted to know as much about the makeup of the networks of unlawful trade and traders as possible. Find out, he wrote, "what ships they traveled on, what their names were and to whom they belonged and from where they came, and the quantity of gold, silver, leathers, sugars and other things that they have unloaded, and what parts of our kingdom they live in, and with whom they correspond and do business." Pearls moved undetected with particular facility, thanks to their material qualities, but they illuminated a much larger world of exchange and alliance that continued to operate semi-independently of the imperial bureaucracy intended to track and contain it.⁴⁷

The motivations of people dealing in pearls were as varied as pearls themselves. Moving untaxed pearls across borders did not always point to large networks of clandestine smugglers; sometimes the unregistered trades served far more humble personal needs. In the southern Iberian port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda in 1579, one Captain Alonso Forero returned from the Indies carrying two ounces of undeclared pearls. When the pearls were discovered, he explained that he had brought the jewel "for his personal expenses along the way, and to cover his time at court, and so that if the [courier] ship were to come in he could go for the post." Forero sought to use the jewels as his hedge against future uncertainties, but instead they were seized and fell into the hands of a greedy port agent, whom the captain unsuccessfully sued in the hope of seeing his pearls returned. Forero was unusual only because he got caught.⁴⁸

The union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in 1580 made controlling goods in transit through peninsular ports even more difficult: pearls (among other items) often disappeared amid the confusion of competing and often

47. The king sent a royal decree to the House of Trade in Seville, asking officials there to send to his ambassador to Portugal, Don Juan de Silva, copies of certain laws and ordinances relevant to the case of a Portuguese vessel that had sailed from Portugal to Margarita and had returned to Portugal with unregistered pearls (AGI, IG: 1956, legajo 2, fols. 1r–1v [July 24, 1576]). A month later, the king wrote again to the ambassador, this time thanking him for a report on another parcel of unregistered pearls that had been seized in Lisbon (AGI, IG: 426, legajo 26, fols. 6–7 [Aug. 22, 1576]). Ambassador de Silva knew the name of the man in Lisbon for whom the latest recovered jewels were destined, and the king ordered that the information about these pearls be passed on to the officials in Seville, who were to look into the matter of the Lisbon contact's associates in that city.

48. AGI, IG: 739, no. 218 (Nov. 4, 1579), IG: 1956, legajo 3, fols. 50–50v (Nov. 13, 1579).

contradictory regulations and the increasing specialization and organization of those who dealt with them.⁴⁹ In 1583, Seville's royally appointed driller of pearls complained to the king that the majority of pearls that entered the city did so illegally, unregistered and untaxed. Far from the peninsula, pearls continued along their varied paths to market. For example, Dutch traveler Jan Huyghen van Linschoten in the early 1590s encountered a Spanish ship captain in the Azores who offered to sell him pearls that he carried on board worth fifty thousand ducats.⁵⁰

Pearls captured peoples' imaginations on scales small and large. They symbolized the romance of maritime empire and the ambitions of those who sought to stake a large claim to the wealth it produced; they could be used concretely to finesse financial matters of personal importance or to reaffirm personal alliances. Evidence of pearls' prominence in both arenas emerge from the courts of Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century, where wealthy and ambitious Medici rulers in Florence collected pearls and commissioned reflections on their origins, and where in Venice high-ranking Spanish diplomats conducted furtive pearl trades in a climate of political uncertainty and financial precariousness. Pearls' power in action and in art thus extended from the sandy shores of the Pearl Coast to the corridors of European courts.

The Medici rulers of Florence were intensely interested in the Americas and sponsored artwork exploring the New World and its implications in addition to amassing large collections of exotic objects of American provenance.

49. For a succinct discussion of the impact of the union on border controls, taxes, and trade between the two nations, see Miguel Ángel Melón Jiménez, *Hacienda, comercio y contrabando en la frontera de Portugal (Siglos XV-XVIII)* (Cáceres, 1999), 41–57. An example of the tricky situations that arose in regulating the pearl trade during the period of the union is seen in the lengthy process that accompanied the evaluation and sale of some unregistered pearls that had been recovered from a Portuguese ship in 1597. The case reveals the complicated relationship between the Lisbon customhouse (Casa de Alfândega), Spanish officials, and the hired lapidary, silversmith, pearl borer, and auctioneer who were in charge of selling the pearls and delivering the profit to the Spanish royal consejo. See AGI, Contaduría: 45, 1591–1599, ramo 15 (1597); AGI, IG: 427, legajo 31, fols. 24r–24v (Aug. 13, 1597); IG: 1957, legajo 5, fols. 56–56v (Oct. 15, 1597); IG: 744, no. 190 (Nov. 5, 1597).

50. Enrique Otte, *Las perlas del Caribe: Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua* (Caracas, 1977), 51. Linschoten's encounter is discussed in Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 327. Linschoten does not say whether he pursued the offer, but it does not appear so; see Huygen van Linschoten, "Of Certain Notable and Memorable Accidents That Happened during My Continuance in Tercera," in *Voyage of Huygen van Linschoten* (London, 1598), book II, chap. 99.

Pearls and pearl fishing figured prominently in their patronage, pointing to the significance of the industry in giving shape to European fantasies of maritime dominance.⁵¹ *The Treasures of the Sea* was painted for Florentine Ferdinando De' Medici around 1590 by the Florence-based artist Jacobo Zucchi (Figure 11, Plate 3). The image, though fantastical in many ways (particularly its mixture of gods and mortals), is firmly located in the Americas through its depiction not only of a monkey and a parrot (associated with the West Indies) but also of the pearl-fishing practices described in some of the earliest accounts of the fisheries. Pearls' long-standing association with female sensuality is on full display, but there are visual references to the actual labor of pearl diving as well, with male bodies in indigenous-seeming carved wooden trunk canoes gathering oysters in the background. Also, among other activities, archers take aim at maritime targets while swimmers and a female holding what appear to be weights collect additional treasures from the sea. Unlike the fourteenth-century *Catalan Atlas*, which separated pearls from the bivalves that produced them, the Zucchi illustration makes a clear link between the jewel and the oysters from which they emerge. The abundance of pearls shown in shells and underfoot is perhaps an echo of tales of New World plenty. Pearls were clearly a symbol of maritime bounty and of female sexuality and sensuality, but the particulars of the painting suggest that embedded in this European fascination with the jewel was a curiosity about the types of labor that produced it.⁵²

Additional paintings within the Medici collection attest to the family's fascination with pearl fishing as symbolic of overseas wealth and evocative of exotic labor regimes. The first three dukes of Tuscany followed Spain's New World explorations with interest and sought to collect items from the Americas. As Lia Markey explores in her work on the Medici collections, Ferdinando in particular expressed a curiosity about pearls and representations of their harvesting. Alessandro Allori's pearl-diver sketch and pearl-fishing scenes as well as Giovanni Stradano's image of pearl diving in a mélange of

51. Lia Markey first brought the Medici interest in pearl fishing to my attention, and I am very grateful for her help with these images. See Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence* (University Park, Pa., 2016). Mónica Domínguez-Torres was also very generous in sharing her work and insights on depictions of pearl fishing with me. See her essay "Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean: Early Images of Slavery and Forced Migration in the Americas," in Persephone Braham, ed., *African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States* (Newark, Del., 2015), 73–82.

52. On early pearl-fishing practices, see Domínguez-Torres, "Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean," in Braham, ed., *African Diaspora*, 73.

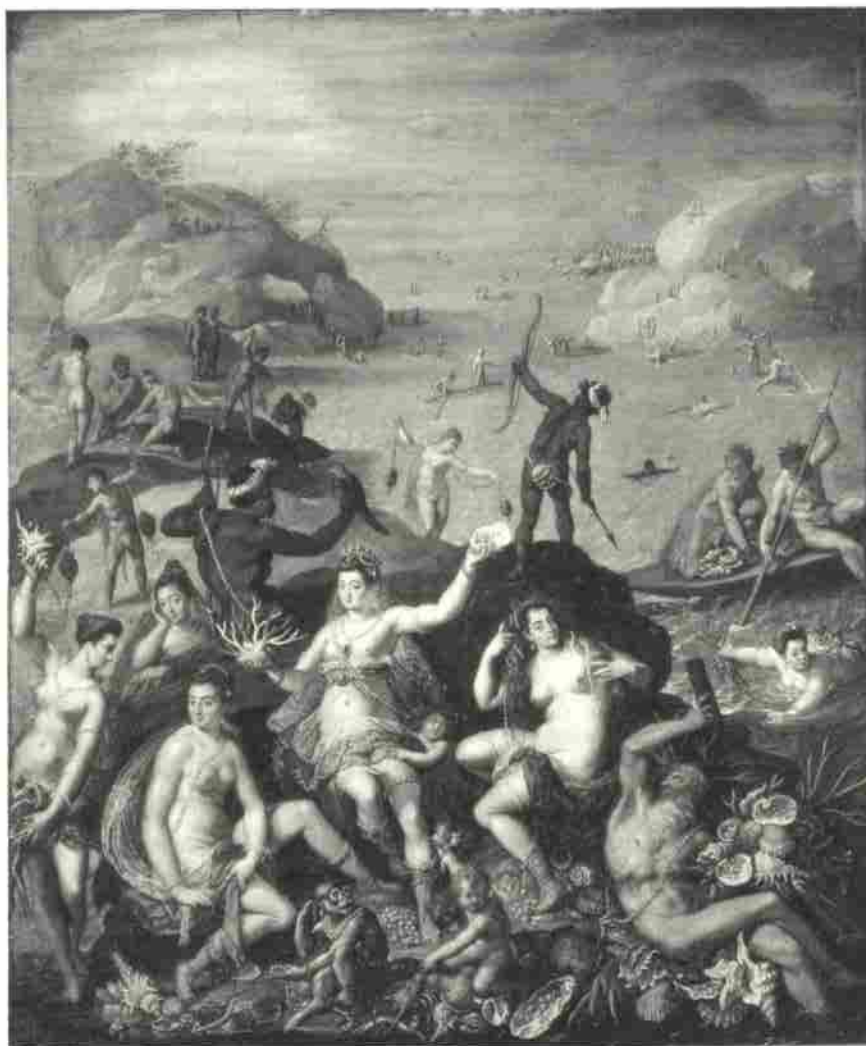


Figure 11. Jacopo Zucchi, *Treasures of the Sea, or Allegory of the Discovery of America*. Circa 1549–1590. Oil on copper. Galleria Borghese, Rome.
 Photograph: Scala / Art Resource, N.Y.

various parts of the world show that the jewel was already a potent symbol of the exoticism of foreign markets as well as of the human capital required to produce the wealth of expansion. Allori's pearl diver is of indeterminate origin and is half clothed, showing a powerful masculine physique. He evokes man's power to control nature—and perhaps, through his posture of contemplation, suggests that the act of subduing nature—and the imperial enterprise itself—requires thought and care (Figure 12). Allori's painting of a far more complex scene of pearl gathering is as devoid of precise context as the sketch of the single diver (Figure 13). The image suggests empire, with semi-distant scenes of somewhat frantic oyster harvesting by numerous actors in crowded boats, watched intently by many figures on shore. Those on shore focus on the cornucopias of pearl wealth emerging from conch shells.⁵³

Allori's painting has echoes of the reality of pearl harvesting (it occurred in boats, by people), but, as noted, it provides little detail rooted in global practices. There are no bodies of color, and some of the participants on land suggest classical gods, placing the painting in some imagined mythos of maritime empire. Naked female bodies further add to the sensuality of the painting (and pearls' long-standing feminine overtones) and conjure the idea of empire as an assertion of masculine authority over a female nature in need of conquest and subduing. The Stradano image, on the other hand, reflects a much more detailed attention to the actual practices of pearl harvesting (Figure 14). The divers descend underwater on ropes, and the tented shacks on land call to mind early descriptions of the Caribbean pearl fisheries, as does the rendition of family groups.⁵⁴

Beyond the private rooms of the Medici palaces and the interest their collections evince in pearl fishing as a heuristic device for contemplating overseas ventures, pearls were used in Italy in ways that echoed pearls' practical uses on the Pearl Coast and elsewhere: to negotiate fluctuating private and political fortunes. From the Caribbean to London, Italy, and beyond, pearls traveled along networks of commerce and friendship. They permitted men (and women) to take advantage of the benefits of newly connected markets while simultaneously reaffirming the durability of alliances that transcended shifting boundaries and the vagaries of that same market. Imperial governance depended upon these agents, humble and elite servants alike, to do

53. Markey, *Imagining the Americas*, esp. chapters 5 and 6.

54. For an overview of nature as female and a new early modern language of dominance and mastery, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, 1980).

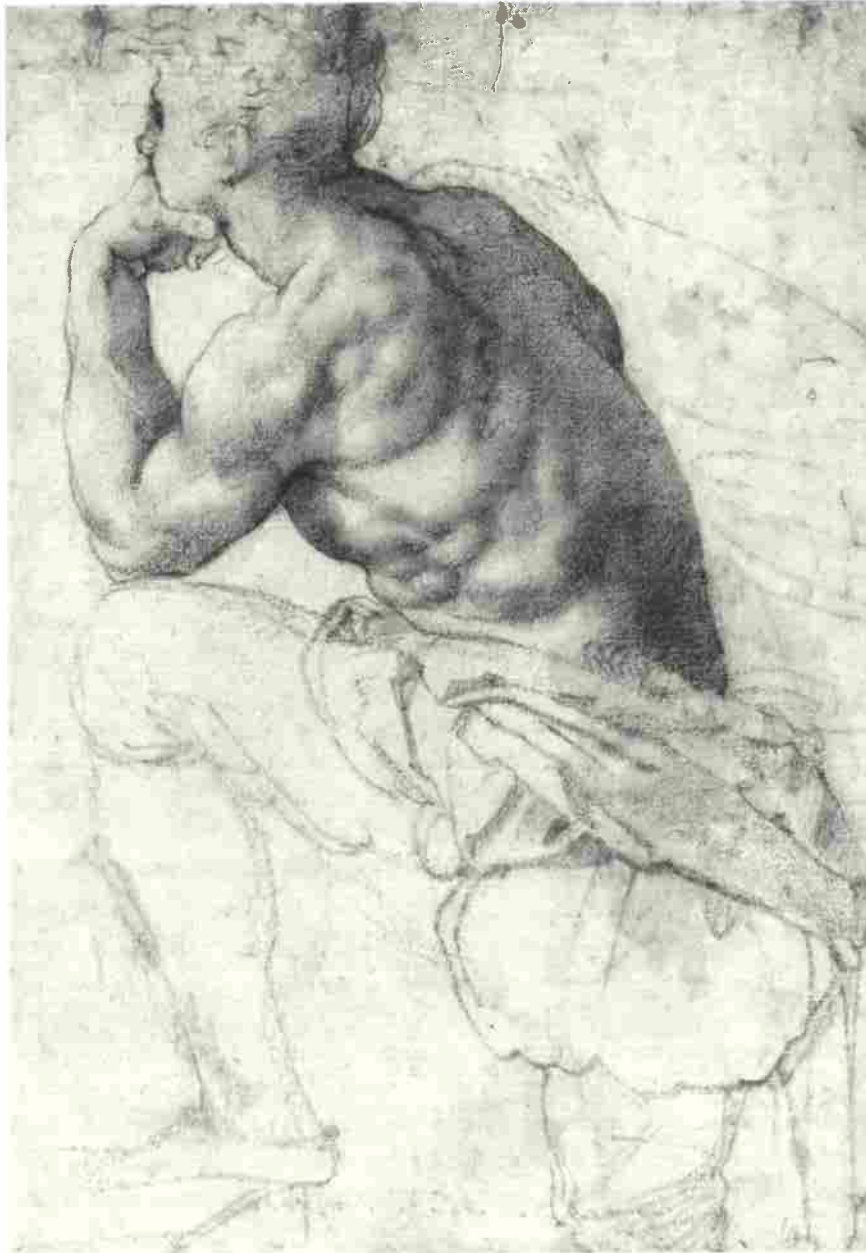
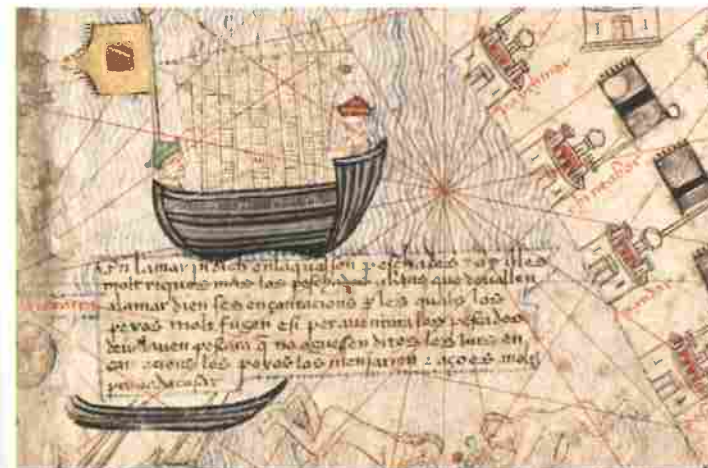


Figure 12. Alessandro Allori, *A Pearl Diver*. Circa 1570.
Black chalk on laid paper, 30.2 cm. × 21 cm. Gift of David E. Rust, 2005.147.1.
Courtesy, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Plate 1. *Enameled Sea Dragon Pendant with Baroque Pearl*. Spain, late sixteenth century. Permission, The British Museum, London

Plate 2. *Detail of Pearl Diving from Catalan Atlas*. Circa 1375. Permission, Bibliothèque nationale de France. The cartouche describes spells used to warn off dangerous fish. Note that the pearls are depicted as bright precious stones.



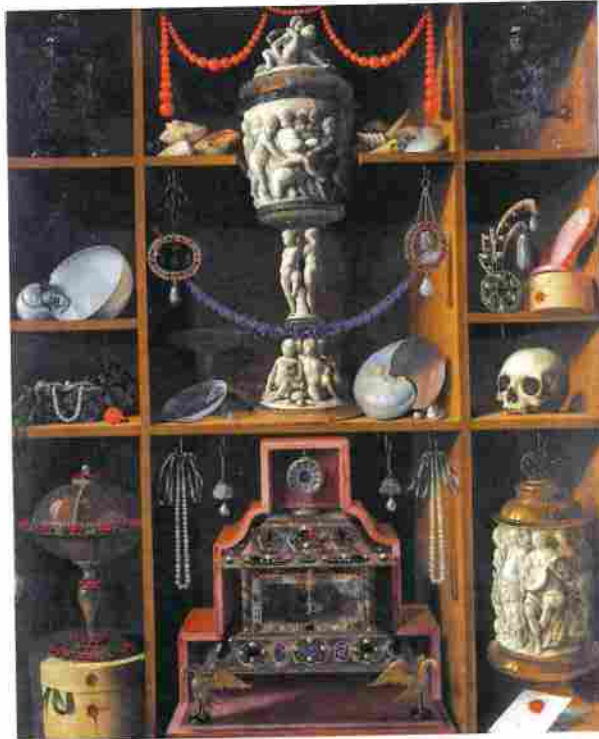


Plate 12. Johann Georg Hinz, *Cabinet of Collectibles*. 1666. Oil on canvas, 115.5 × 93.3 cm. Photo credit: bpk Bildagentur / Hamburger Kunsthalle / Elke Walford / Art Resource, N.Y.

Plate 13. Johann Melchior Dinglinger (goldsmith), *Moor with Monstrous Pearl Shell*. 1724. Detail of photograph by Jürgen Karpinski. Wood, lacquered, gold, silver, gold plated, enamel, precious stones, cameos, pearls, mother of pearl, 19.9 cm. × 19.4 cm. Photo credit: bpk Bildagentur / Gruenes Gewoelbe, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Germany / Jürgen Karpinski / Art Resource, N.Y.



Figure 13. Alessandro Allori, *Pesca delle Perle*. Circa 1570s. Photograph: Fototeca dei Musei Civici Fiorentini. Firenze, Museo di Palazzo Vecchio

its bidding, but they regularly used pearls in ways that undermined imperial goals, putting forth their own divergent understandings of which boundaries mattered. In distinct settings, pearls revealed highly personal understandings of the nature of value and the assessment of worth.

A series of remarkable cases involving pearls unfolded around Cristóbal de Salazar, the secretary to the Spanish embassy in Venice in the 1570s and 1580s. These pearl and jewel deals played a role in Salazar's management of a set of alliances that stretched across considerable distances in a fractious



Figure 14. Giovanni Stradano, Pearl Diving. Sixteenth Century.
Pen and ink and bodycolour (white) on paper, 26.3 cm. × 18.7 cm.
The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Iberian empire. Furthermore, these transactions revolved around men who were powerful players in the courts of Western Europe in the last half of the sixteenth century—not people for whom pearls or other jewels represented their only hope for economic or social benefit. The actors in these cases are extraordinary for their prominence—some of the most high-ranking diplomats in the Spanish imperial world, men with seemingly secure political and financial fortunes. One distinguished player was the same Spanish ambassador at the heart of the botched Gravesend pearl trade in England in the 1560s, who was posted subsequently to Venice, Don Diego de Guzmán de Silva. His protagonism in both cases suggests that pearls played an enduring role in his construction of alternate commercial and diplomatic networks. The leading figure among the diplomats in Italy involved in clandestine pearl trades was Don Enrique de Guzmán, count of Olivares, the Spanish ambassador to Rome from 1582 to 1591. (His son Gaspar de Guzmán y Pimentel would become the de facto ruler of Spain in the first half of the seventeenth century, a man whose political fortunes rose and fell on his attempts to integrate the multiple parts of the Iberian empire.) As it turned out, pearls figured in the

count's calculations of how to navigate fluctuations in his personal fortunes. Additional participants were the Spanish secretary of state and war under Philip II, Don Juan de Idiáquez, and a number of archbishops, ambassadors, minor counts, and even a cardinal.

At some point during his tenure at the Spanish embassy in Venice in the 1570s and 1580s, Salazar served all of these men as a jewel broker and occasional mule of smuggled gems. No wonder that these men anxiously sought to preserve their personal fortunes and ties in this climate, as other types of affiliation seemed fleeting and unstable. Pearls—hidden under bulky tunics, sealed into secret boxes, strung and restrung in the latest fashions—traded hands among these men (sometimes at the behest of their wives) to preserve an invisible type of wealth and value: the esteem they accorded one another and their sense of their position in a rapidly changing world.

Italy at the time consisted of a complex assortment of republics, duchies, city-states, and kingdoms, all of which had their own political realities and agendas. Spain formally controlled four states (Sicily, Sardinia, Naples, and Milan) and possessed de facto control of many others. The political realities of governing these Italian territories led the Spanish to have three and sometimes four separate embassies on the Italian peninsula, Venice and Rome among them (along with Genoa and Savoy). Spain's control of its Italian territories depended on elaborate webs of patronage and favors, the burden of which rested chiefly on ambassadors, who were crucial to maintaining the authority of a distant king.⁵⁵

Of Italy's independent states, the Republic of Venice was by far the most powerful. Its strategic location, its long-standing commercial importance, and its willingness to occasionally ally with the Ottomans made it a particularly difficult posting for the Spanish diplomats assigned there and charged with winning Venetian loyalty. As the embassy secretary, Salazar occupied a key post in the city's diplomatic and commercial web. Among his other duties, he appears to have had his finger on the pulse of the city's famous jewel trade, keeping track of stolen jewels, astute sellers, and eager buyers. He facilitated engagement between his extensive network of diplomatic con-

55. A series of political and military conquests over the course of the sixteenth century had left the Spanish Habsburgs as the dominant force in Italian affairs, a situation that would remain the case (although under increasing duress) until the death of Charles II and the end of the Habsburg line in 1700. Spain possessed de facto control of Rome, Genoa, Tuscany, Savoy, and the minor states. For Spanish Italy, see Thomas James Dan-delet and John A. Marino, eds., *Spain in Italy: Politics, Society, and Religion, 1500–1700* (Leiden, 2007).

tacts and this lucrative demimonde. Salazar was perhaps little different from the diplomats with whom the Sephardic merchants dealt in London twenty years earlier. In Italy, as in London and in the pearl fisheries, expertise and private knowledge—independent action and assessment—fueled Salazar's power, much as it enabled the relative autonomy of pearl divers on the Pearl Coast of Venezuela, thousands of miles away. In his role as jewel broker, Salazar amassed intimate knowledge of his contacts' tastes and finances. Even when jewels were at the heart of his correspondence with his contacts, his exchanges contained personal and political news as well. The details of his associates' needs and concerns, their friends and possessions, placed Salazar in a powerful position. They enabled him to peer across realms of activity—the private home with its particular financial concerns, shifting political borders, and tumultuous markets.⁵⁶

These overlapping interests are visible in an elaborate clandestine jewel trade Salazar conducted on behalf of a Portuguese cleric named Lope de Almeida. The men's correspondence suggests that trading in pearls and other jewels was a fraught activity for elite consumers. These trades enabled them to use increasingly connected markets to engage with financial and political uncertainties on their own terms but prompted them to deny this uncertainty by cloaking their arrangements in language that emphasized the permanence of friendship and allegiance.

The Almeida transaction took place in the spring of 1579, in the midst of the succession crisis that would lead to Spain's annexation of Portugal in 1580. Almeida wrote to Salazar from Lisbon to arrange the transport of jewels of considerable value from Italy to Portugal, including diamonds worth 300 ducats, sapphires worth 100 ducats, and pearls worth 30. This was a sizable sum: Salazar's entire yearly salary was only 280 ducats. Almeida provided Salazar with explicit instructions on how to transport the jewels undetected and revealed that this was not the first time that Salazar had performed such a service for him. Salazar was to dismantle a pearl necklace consisting of seven chains and a single good pearl. He could then wear the chains around his neck "as personal adornment, over your smock, and the pearl should be hidden within a stack of letters so that it does not form a visible bump, just like your grace sent the diamond to me in Vicenza." Once the jewels arrived in Lisbon, Salazar was to arrange their sale—an equally fraught transaction involving a web of trusted allies, including the ambassador of Mantua and three merchants, two of whom were likely New Christians, and one who was

German. A few years later, another transfer of jewels from Milan to Lisbon, via Venice and Madrid, prompted Salazar and Almeida to employ similar language as they coordinated the secret transfer of pearls and other jewels with the help of numerous dukes, ambassadors, and trusted couriers.⁵⁷

The involvement of such merchants in the sale and distribution of Almeida's jewels reveals that these secular and religious officials were embedded in both royal and commercial channels even as they acted semi-independently of them. Almeida's closing line to Salazar in the letter arranging the initial sale in Lisbon suggests that he preferred to consider the men's dealings as affirmations of the permanence of their friendship, rather than as indications of the degree to which both men's fortunes were conditioned and shaped by the shifting market. Although an essential part of these arrangements was the complicity created by navigating and bypassing other channels for the movement of wealth, Almeida nonetheless employed rhetoric of distance from precisely these types of concerns. He closed by affirming to Salazar that "after God, I trust no one more in this matter than your grace . . . whatever state in which your grace and I find ourselves and in whatever part [of the world], may your grace count on me with the utmost confidence in matters of your happiness, and may I enjoy the same, because it would not be right for our strong and deep friendship to be subject to the laws and lunacies of the world." It would be hard to imagine a clearer articulation of the value these types of trades held for their participants. In a world in flux, characterized by unprecedented mobility and shifting borders (evoked by Almeida's reference to the two men's impermanent "states" and scattered locations), they allowed friends and associates to reaffirm the stability of their ties to one another and their approaches to cultivating and caring for what mattered to them. The "laws and lunacies"—an interesting pairing, suggesting that Almeida saw madness in proliferating regulations—that threatened to curtail the men's movements and actions were no match for their "strong and deep friendship."⁵⁸

Comparable transactions arranged by Salazar in the 1580s were pearl sales for men acting on behalf of their wives. The anxiety that pervades their correspondence suggests that these men disliked having to sell the pearls—grateful, perhaps, for the ease with which the jewel could be anonymously turned into cash but uncomfortable with the instability of their own status that such a sale implied. These concerns are seen with remarkable clarity in

56. AGS. Papeles de Estado de Venecia, legajo 1550, exp. 470 (n.d.).

57. *Ibid.*, legajo 1522, exp. 143 (May 5, 1579).

58. *Ibid.*

a pearl sale Salazar conducted on behalf of Don Enrique de Guzmán. Even a man of his stature was not immune from financial uncertainty and the attendant embarrassment. In 1583, his third year as ambassador to Rome, Olivares sought to arrange a highly secret and profitable sale of pearls through Salazar. Ten letters written over the course of more than a year reveal that the count's wish to profit from the pearls was outweighed only by his desire to keep the entire affair a secret. Olivares's preference for anonymity did not prevent him from instructing Salazar on every aspect of the sale, from the wisdom of restringing the pearls to meet Venetian tastes to negotiating with merchants, to which currency to accept in payment, to finding the right kind of buyers. Olivares demanded Salazar's absolute discretion as well as regular reports about his interactions with merchants. The count, perhaps reflecting on the pearls' quality and their dignity as jewels, wanted to sell the pearls to someone who intended to keep them rather than to resell them for a profit. This hope might reveal some perceived distinction in status between treating the jewel as a commodity—a wrought jewel in the form of a necklace—and as a resource to be assessed in terms of its cash value, dismantled, and sold separately.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the men's correspondence is the hint that it might well have been Olivares's wife directing the transaction and advising her husband on how to facilitate the most profitable sale. Either Olivares or his wife was intimately familiar with the market for pearls and had a keen eye for their quality and the conditions that most mattered to potential buyers, such as the degree to which the pearls on a necklace "matched." Though his wife is never referred to by name, a late letter to Salazar from the count suggests that she was indeed the *eminence gris* behind the transaction.

59. The count proved to be a powerful and contentious figure. At the time of the pearl deal he was in the middle of navigating the biggest issue of his tenure as ambassador—the papal support (political and financial) of a Spanish invasion of England, the famous and failed Spanish Armada. On Olivares in Rome, see Levin, *Agents of Empire*, 112–123. Olivares was said to have arrived in Rome with an annual disposable income of forty thousand ducats, three-quarters of which derived from his own estates and the rest of which came from the king. His initial entourage included thirty-four servants, and over the ten years he spent in Rome his household grew to more than a hundred people. They were not the only high-ranking officials in Rome to turn to pearls as a resource that year: provincial superior of the Jesuits in Rome, Claudio Aquaviva, read a letter from the provincial superior of India, Alessandro Valignano in Cochín, about the recent commission of a substantial pearl purchase. See Aquaviva to Valignano, Dec. 23, 1586, in Joseph Wicki and John Gomes, eds., *Documenta Indica*, 18 vols. (Rome, 1948–1988), XIV (1585–1588), 525–527.

In September of that year, he reported, "The countess is very satisfied and grateful to your Grace for the care with which you will arrange [the pearls'] successful sale," noting that those who criticized the quality of the pearls were only "doing their job" as they hoped to buy them. A few months later, the count continued to negotiate on behalf of his wife: "As far as what your Grace tells me that they are offering for the pearls, truth be told, the countess would prefer they give her more because they cost more in Spain than what they are offering for them. If this is because they are poorly strung and arranged, then your Grace should proceed as if this were his own matter" and restring them. It is impossible to tell whether the care with which the countess pursued the sale reflected an emotional attachment to the pearls beyond her clear financial assessment of their value. For whatever reason, she urged her husband and his associate to adhere to her own informed assessments of the jewels' worth.⁶⁰

Like his jewel-trading peers, Olivares used networks of contacts to move his pearls from city to city, but he distinguished among the people he was willing to involve in the business and those he wanted to keep from it. At one point, the count wrote to Salazar that he could not act upon the deal until an unnamed archbishop examined the pearls and told him what to do with them. When the examination finally occurred a few months later, Olivares remained reluctant to send the pearls to Venice because of his fears concerning the reliability of the mail system. He depended on an elite ally to assure him that the trip was safe, informing Salazar that he was waiting for the go-ahead from an unspecified ambassador before he mailed the pearls to Salazar so that Salazar could unload them (*salir de ellas*), a jarring phrase that suggests Olivares's discomfort with the entire transaction.⁶¹

When Olivares finally sent the pearls on their way to Venice, they were in a "well-appointed and sealed box," a description that evokes the containers in which pearls were to be kept along the Venezuelan Pearl Coast; in both places, people sought secure methods of containing the jewel. The safe transport of the pearls involved an elaborate system of unwitting couriers and decoys that Olivares devised in collaboration with a network of church officials. These measures reflected more than just his fears about "all of the risks and mishaps that can occur" during the jewel's transfer; he was also desperate to conceal his identity as the seller, "because neither here [in Rome] nor there

60. AGS, Papeles de Estado de Venecia, legajo 1537, exp. 47 (Sept. 27, 1586), legajo 1538, exp. 38 (Nov. 1, 1586).

61. The phrase is used twice in slightly different form *ibid.*, legajo 1536, exp. 30 (July 5, 1586).

[in Venice] do I want it to be rumored that these pearls are mine.” His concerns again surfaced when Salazar requested permission from the count to prolong the sale: Olivares grudgingly consented but warned that he do so “with such security that no risk is run.”⁶²

Throughout his negotiations with Salazar, Olivares oscillated between a desire to move forward with the search and the need to control every aspect of it, urging Salazar not to be “hastier than necessary in order to obtain as much advantage as possible.” At one point, Olivares urged Salazar to hold onto the pearls *hasta su sazón*, an ambiguous phrase that could mean “until the time is right” or “until their season,” implying that pearl sales shifted depending on the time of year. Though the final price of the pearls concerned him, he was most adamant about keeping the sale anonymous. When Salazar suggested that the count mention the pearls to a high-ranking peer who might be interested, Olivares resoundingly rejected the proposal: “As far as the pearls are concerned, I have said nothing to Don Fernando nor would I want anyone to know that they are mine.” Given the secrecy Olivares hoped to maintain surrounding the pearls’ sale, it is not clear how the business concluded, only that Olivares trusted Salazar to carry out the transaction to his advantage.⁶³

Olivares’s pearls were not the only ones Salazar was charged with selling in 1586. That same year, one Hernando de Torres sent a small box containing valuable pearls to Salazar from Rome. In the accompanying letter, de Torres explained that the box contained two strands of pearls that he had purchased for 208 ducats and another, vastly superior strand from his wife, worth 1,000 ducats. Salazar was to act as the middleman, arranging the sale of the pearls in Venice “at the best price possible.” De Torres was clearly quite eager to turn the pearls into cash: he repeated that he wanted the merchant to “make the most of the sale” and “unload” the pearls, giving the proceeds to Salazar. De Torres’s letter bespeaks urgency and embarrassment: he closed his brief letter by “begging” Salazar to act on the sale as quickly as possible and with as much care “as if they were his own” while also requesting that he “forgive de Torres for the bother.” In a sign of further desperation, de Torres hastily scrawled at the bottom of the page, beneath his signature, yet another reminder to sell the pearls “as well as possible” (Figure 15). De Torres wrote

62. For “well appointed and sealed box,” and “neither here . . . nor there,” see *ibid.*, legajo 1537, exp. 45 (Aug. 8, 1586); for “risks and mishaps,” see legajo 1537, exp. 42 (July 19, 1586); for “such security,” see legajo 1537, exp. 47 (Sept. 27, 1586).

63. *Ibid.*, legajo 1537, exp. 44 (Aug. 2, 1586), exp. 51 (Oct. 25, 1586).



Figure 15. Hernando de Torres to Cristóbal de Salazar, Jan. 18, 1586, AGS, Papeles de Estado de Venecia, legajo 1536, exp. 93

Salazar at weekly intervals for the next two months, alternating between telling Salazar to sell the pearls “no matter what” (while also specifying the prices at which each strand of pearls were to be offered) and urging Salazar to resist selling if he could not get a certain price.⁶⁴

The tone of desperation in these men’s letters likely reflected their financial straits and would have characterized their correspondence whether or not pearls were a part of the goods they sought to sell. But pearls were indeed the good to which they turned, pointing to the remarkable utility of this jewel as a source not only of wealth but also as a token to express their own, unquantifiable assessments of the value of their alliances in the face of an expanding, ambitious, and unstable imperial state.

Whether in Venezuela, England, or Iberia, pearls loaned themselves to expressions of independence, either of individuals navigating changing imperial horizons to the best of their abilities or of networks of alliances operating outside, or partially outside, imperial channels. Pearls were a jewel whose particular qualities made them accessible to a wide range of people who then used them as vectors of commercial and political debt in ways they found beneficial. We see these contending networks in pearl dealings in the fisheries as well as in other politically charged imperial borderlands where jurisdiction over subjects and objects remained uncertain. These contested pearl dealings illuminate how people navigated an era of transition in which relationships among subjects and between subjects and the crown were being redefined. As an imperial bureaucracy emerged to harness the mobility of the era in ways that augmented the authority of an increasingly centralized state, vernacular trade practices reveal the small-scale networks on which the state depended. These networks, however, often functioned as a reflection of independent judgments about the relationship between human and material wealth and political power.

The American encounter with pearls unleashed a series of unpredictable reactions in the fisheries themselves and in pearl markets around the globe. The early lessons of these settlements—the imperfectly understood ecological component of pearl production, the role of skilled labor in their harvesting, and the difficulty their sheer variety posed to administrative attempts to tax and otherwise control their circulation—all continued to characterize this corner of the Caribbean into the seventeenth century. Even as the Antilles turned into a backwater of the growing mainland empire, the diversity and in-

commensurability of people and of pearls meant that the fisheries continued to pose problems of governance. Their complexity forced the monarchy to confront the inadequacies of its administrative bureaucracy when it came to managing wealth. Subjects continually came up with new ways to use pearls to further their own aims, just as new names for different types of pearls proliferated along the Pearl Coast.

The unpredictability produced by pearls’ abundance characterized their circulation far beyond the Americas as well. It was not just that pearls were now available in quantities and at prices that made them accessible to consumers who before the Columbian encounter had not been associated with the jewel—such as the black women bedecked in pearl necklaces who so astonished López de Gómara. It was that, even as pearls prompted royal attention and innovation as an important source of wealth and a driver of the slave trade to and within the Americas, they simultaneously encouraged the construction and maintenance of alliances that operated independently of crown supervision and the nascent imperial bureaucracy. These alternate networks spanned the Americas, Europe, and beyond, and they encompassed women and men and consumers free and unfree, elite and humble. The range of experiences and concerns of the individuals within these networks stood—as did the diversity of pearls themselves—as a reminder of the difficulty of imposing order and uniformity upon assessments of value.

64. *Ibid.*, legajo 1536, exp. 93 (Jan. 18, 1586).