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"To dress a room for Montagu": Pacific Cosmopolitanism and Elizabeth Montagu's Feather Hangings

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On 6 June 1791, the businesswoman and critic Elizabeth Montagu held a breakfast reception. The party was lavish even by her high standards, and was intended to display the extravagant renovation of her Portland Square townhouse in London. Among the new decorations was a set of enormous panels covered with thousands of feathers sewn into colourful floral wreaths and festoons. Montagu showed these feather panels off to several hundred guests, including Queen Charlotte and five of her daughters. They were described in detail in the next day's newspapers. In Montagu's "feather-room," noted a breathless report on this "elegant fête" printed in more than half a dozen London papers, "the walls are wholly covered with feathers, artfully sewed together."[1] The feathers were "from all parts of the world," marvelled another writer, and had "been ten years in collecting."[2] Their colours had "wonderful effects on a feather ground of a dazzling whiteness," and the "numerous and splendid company," it was concluded, "expressed the warmest approbation of the taste and magnificence of Mrs. MONTAGU."[3] This was presumably all very

1. *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London, 11–14 June 1791); *Whitehall Evening Post* (London, 14–16 June 1791); *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London, 15 June 1791); *Diary or Woodfall's Register* (London, 16 June 1791). A shortened version appears in *Morning Herald* (London, 15 June 1791) and several others.

2. *Whitehall Evening Post* (London, 11–14 June 1791).

3. *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London, 11–14 June 1791).

satisfactory for Montagu and her friends, although less than a month later the walls of the feather room had to be covered in paper and linen "to preserve it from moth and the summers dust."[4] The panels disappear from the written record around this time, and may have been dismantled before Montagu's death in 1800.

It is clear that these ephemeral and now-forgotten objects were a means for Montagu to publicise her own status and wealth, and to promote her 'bluestocking' circle within fashionable London society. This article suggests, additionally, that the feather panels embodied Montagu's cosmopolitan embrace of material objects and cultural influences from around the world. Contemporary responses to the panels, most famously a poem by William Cowper, were mostly celebratory of the resulting exotic objects, and their peculiar beauty. Nevertheless, I argue in conclusion, Montagu's unusual decision to use feathers as her raw material opened the way, both then and now, to more critical readings of the Enlightened cosmopolitan values encoded within the surface of the featherwork.

* * *

It was reported at the time of their unveiling that Montagu had designed and made the panels herself. This would have represented a rare venture into the ladylike crafts of "featherwork misses" she did not generally enjoy.[5] Rather, Montagu mostly acted as the commissioner and collector of the project: roles for which she was unusually well-qualified. The panels required not only funding and organisation, but a vast network of social connections in Britain and abroad from whom rare coloured feathers could be requested. Following a barrage of correspondence with this network, feathers began in 1781 to arrive in small packets from around the world at Montagu's country estate at Sandleford in Berkshire. There they were sorted, trimmed, and sewn together, in a dedicated workroom, by a small army of servants

4. Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter (27 June 1791), qtd. in Reginald Blunt, *Mrs. Montagu: 'Queen of the Blues': Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800* (London: Constable, [1923]), vol. 2 of 2,. 258.

5. *General Evening Post* (London, 28 May 1791); Elizabeth Montagu to Sarah Scott (17 August 1777), qtd. in Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation 1712–1812* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2012), 74.

supervised by the forewoman, Elizabeth Tull. Visitors were admitted to admire the spectacle of the featherwork's construction. The first public account was published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* in 1788, long before the panels were complete.[6] It took until 1791 for the work to be finished and sent to London. Three years before this, the poet William Cowper had decided to try to win Montagu's patronage for himself and his friends. To this end he had written a poem, "On the beautiful Feather-Hangings, designed for Mrs. Montagu," and sent it to be published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.[7] These verses seem, as Scott Hess notes, "unsqueamish"[8] in their compliments to Montagu (whom Cowper did not know well, but admired as a writer) and the feather panels (which he had never seen). They achieved their aim of attracting Montagu's favour, although they were then rapidly almost forgotten by other readers and critics.

The construction of the panels, Cowper writes, is a parallel to Montagu's creation of a sociable, protected coterie of needy intellectuals, who are gathered together like the feathers within the luxurious rooms of Portland Square. Montagu, as generous and skilful hostess and as featherwork artist, "[b]oth Poet saves and Plume from fading."[9] Recent writers on Montagu have followed Cowper's lead. Elizabeth Eger, in particular, focuses on the "exuberance" and "joyful ostentation" of the panels, as evoked by the poem. She interprets Montagu's featherwork as a material embodiment of bluestocking conversation: "a visual metaphor for [Montagu's] social ability to blend a variety of individuals into a bold display of harmony."[10]

On the other hand, Emma Major notes that the grandeur of the new Portland Square interiors, including the feather panels, proved difficult to reconcile with the informality and sense of equality needed if conversation was to succeed. This is why, she suggests, Cowper's

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6. *Edinburgh Magazine* 7 (Edinburgh, April 1788), 54.

7. William Cowper, "On the beautiful Feather-Hangings, designed for Mrs. Montagu" in *Gentleman's Magazine* 58 (June 1788): 542. Hereafter cited as "Feather-Hangings."

8. Scott Hess, *Authoring the Self: Self-Representation, Authorship, and the Print Market in British Poetry from Pope through Wordsworth* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 135.

9. "Feather-Hangings," l. 56.

10. Elizabeth Eger, *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Mamillan, 2010), 72–73.

response as poetic supplicant to Montagu is troubled by "an odd tension […] between Montagu's need for feathery tributes, and the birds' well-being." Indeed, the presentation by some writers of, to use Major's words, Montagu the "beneficent deity"[11] was not accepted without question in 1791. For example, for several weeks that summer, paragraphs in the *Morning Post* made a running joke out of the triple meaning of "Mrs. MONTAGUE's feathered nest," hinting at sexual and financial scandal, and mocking her veneration by "the old Bucks of the Metropolis."[12]

Other, more positive accounts emphasised that the feathers were not familiar objects but expensive foreign imports. If the feathers are seen as representing the human individuals gathered in Montagu's rooms, their origin in "all parts of the world" has symbolic significance. It gestures towards an ideal of cosmopolitan sociability in which a successful party could, in Montagu's own words, "resemble the company at ye building of the Tower of Babel."[13] Her guests at the breakfast in June 1791 lived up to this description precisely, at least by report: they were a mixture of "Nobility, Foreign Ambassadours, illustrious Travellers, and Persons of Distinction."[14] Like the collection of feathers, such a collection of exotic guests within one English house proved social and economic status, but also privileged access to British colonial and commercial networks around the world.

The panels could also be viewed as material commodities, combining, like the elegant tea and dinner tables they were designed to adorn, "the produce of all climates."[15] Descriptions of the room as "richly and elegantly covered and ornamented with various feathers from all parts of the world" echo the language of the advertisements for tea, silk, carpets, or china printed on the same newspaper pages, and recast the

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11. Major, 73–74. See also Elizabeth Eger, "Luxury, Industry and Charity: Bluestocking Culture Displayed" in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, edited by Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 190–206; Eger, "Paper Trails and Eloquent Objects: Bluestocking Friendship and Material Culture" in *Parergon* 26, no. 2 (2009): 109–38, 129–30.

12. *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* (London, 16 July 1791). Similar references appear regularly in the same newspaper between 23 June and 16 July 1791.

13. *Whitehall Evening Post* (London, 11–14 June 1791); Elizabeth Montagu to Sarah Scott (14 January 1790), qtd. Eger (2010), 73.

14. *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London, 11–14 June 1791).

15. *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (London, 11–14 June 1791).

panels as material celebrations of the global trade and communication which made them possible.[16] Featherwork could also be associated with more novel imported commodities. Montagu's "true taste" in the arrangement of colours, argued a writer in the *General Evening Post*, "renders her room, perhaps, the most picturesque in the world" — but was not original. Rather, he noted,

> the thought originated among men, whom some of the polite Philosophers of the present day have honoured with the name of savages. The Mexicans were great masters of the harmony or correspondence of colours, and in their management of the plumage of various birds discover a very elegant taste.[17]

As this reference to Mexico suggests, there had been an interest in Britain in exotic feathered curiosities since the arrival of banners, shields, and headdresses from South America in the sixteenth century.[18] While all but a handful of these had long since become faded and moth-eaten, though, the 1770s and 1780s had seen a more recent influx of artifacts which revealed the "very elegant taste" of "savages." Ships in these decades returning from the exploration of the Pacific carried cargoes of unfamiliar objects: weapons, cloth, ornaments, instruments, even canoes.[19] In particular, James Cook's much-mythologised encounter with Hawaii prompted a craze for Hawaiian themes and images, centred around the large quantity of artifacts brought to London in his ships *Resolution* and *Discovery* in 1780.[20]

The iconic Hawaiian artifacts were made of featherwork. In eighteenth-century Hawaii, communal weaving and featherwork techniques were used to produce *'ahu 'ula* (capes and cloaks: Figure 1), *mahiole* (ceremonial helmets), mats, decorations or *lei*, and large *ki'i*

16. *General Evening Post* (London, 28 May 1791).

17. *General Evening Post* (London, 28 May 1791).

18. See Daniela Bleichmar, "Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections" in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, edited by Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 15–31.

19. See Nicholas Thomas, "Licensed Curiosity: Cook's Pacific Voyages" in *The Cultures of Collecting*, edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion, 1994), 116–36; Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories* (Durham: Duke U.P., 1997), 71–132.

20. See Ruth Scobie, "The Many Deaths of Captain Cook: A Study in Metropolitan Mass Culture." PhD thesis, University of York, 2013 .

hulu manu, or busts of sacred figures. These incorporated images of chiefly genealogy and associations with the divine through their designs, materials and rituals of production. Large groups of specialist craftsmen spent many years obtaining, preparing, and weaving feathers into a single artifact, which thus became a marker and embodiment of the power and economic resources of its commissioners and owners. While the original meanings and functions of these objects were continually ignored or misread by Europeans, in London Hawaiian featherwork became the subject of mass fascination and desire. As well as appearing in paintings and on the stage,[21] commodified versions of Hawaiian "painted feathers" could be bought on Pall Mall in the form of "Feather Hats," swiftly "manufactured after the manner of the feather dresses from the Sandwich Island."[22] At shops such as Daniel Boulter's in Yarmouth, consumers were offered authentic Hawaiian curiosities, including a "Beautiful Feathered Cloak, worn by the Chiefs of Owhyhee" and a "Curious Helmet of Scarlet and Yellow Feathers," alongside jewellery, books, perfume and toys.[23]

Sir Ashton Lever's museum, in Leicester Fields, displayed in a single room a spectacular fourteen cloaks alongside six *mahiole* and numerous other feathered items. The "delicate softness and glossy appearance," and "beautiful materials and curious manufacture" of these objects were noted by guidebooks.[24] Visitors marvelled at a head-dress "made of tiny shells and feathers, very densely and neatly sewn on in strips according to colour."[25] They were expected to be interested

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21. See for example George Carter, *Death of Captain Cook* (1781), oil on canvas, National Library of Australia; John Webber, *A Chief of the Sandwich Island* (1787), oil on canvas, National Library of Australia; Johann Zoffany, *The Death of Captain James Cook, 14 February 1779*. (c. 1795), oil on canvas, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The London/ touring pantomimes *Omai* and *The Death of Captain Cook* included costumes loosely inspired by Hawaiian artifacts. For details of these, see David Worrall, *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 139–70.

22. 'Matilda Fitzjohn,' *Joan!!! A Novel* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1796), vol. 4 of 4, 264; *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* (6 November 1781).

23. Daniel Boulter, *Museum Boulterianum. A Catalogue of the Curious and Valuable Collection of Natural and Artificial Curiosities in the Extensive Museum of Daniel Boulter, Yarmouth* (Yarmouth: n.p., c. 1794), 77.

24. *A Companion to the Museum, (Late Sir Ashton Lever's) Removed to Albion Street, the Surry End of Black Friars Bridge* (London: n.p., 1790), 18–19.

25. Sophie von la Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786: Being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche*, edited and translated by Clare Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), 109.

in the process of production, and could examine examples of the "netting only, with the feathers tied in little bunches as prepared for use," and traps used to catch the birds. The dense featherwork surface was similar to "the thickest and richest velvets" of the "most ingenious European artist," it was concluded,[26] and "so bright and lovely are the colours of the feathers […], and with so much art disposed […] to produce light and shade to each other, that we may easily conceive the consequence the wearers derive from them."[27] In a year-long series of paragraphs in the London newspapers in the early 1780s, Lever's museum was described as one of "the most fashionable amusements in Town." Like Montagu's feather room, it was patronised by "great resort of people of the first fashion," including royalty, as well as "the Learned, Curious, and Foreigners."[28] Montagu writes of visiting Lever's museum, which was only a mile and a half from Portland Square, at least once, with her young nephew in 1778.[29] It is very likely that in 1781 she was aware of its new Hawaiian collection and its successful role as a locus of harmonious social mingling, and that this awareness played a role in her decision to create her own featherwork curiosities.

More generally, Montagu would have been familiar with the fashionable, often feminine, aspects of the contemporary British reception of the Pacific. As Gillian Russell has shown, the presence of the Pacific in London in 1770s and 1780s was characterised by the movement of artifacts, stories and people around elite social circles, and associations with pleasure, luxury and "consequence" — but also by the possibility of scandal.[30] This may help to explain why the influence of Hawaii on the feather room is not overtly alluded to in surviving written texts.

At the same time, the very unspokenness of the feather panels' Hawaiian inspiration, recognisable only to those already conversant

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26. *Companion to the Museum*, 11, 19.

27. *The School-Room Party, Out of School Hours: A little work, that will be for young ladies and gentlemen of every description, a most pleasing companion to the Leverian Museum* (London: T. Hurst, 1800), 12.

28. *London Courant Westminster Chronicle and Daily Advertiser* (London, 11 February 1782); *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* (London, 12 February 1782); *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* (London, 1 February 1781).

29. Elizabeth Montagu to Mary Robinson, 8 January 1778. BL Add. MS 40663.

30. Gillian Russell, "An 'entertainment of oddities': fashionable sociability and the Pacific in the 1770s" in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire 1660–1840*, edited by Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004), 48–70.

with the latest global discoveries and the "the most fashionable amusements," would have been a major element of their function as markers of cosmopolitan, Enlightened sociability. In Montagu's earlier writing about this sociability, the symbolic presence of the Pacific takes the form of Mai, a Raiatean man who travelled to Britain in another of Cook's ships, and became in the 1770s a feature of metropolitan high society.[31] Referring to Mai's attendance at the parties of her friend Elizabeth Vesey, Montagu imagines the ideal social space as a room in which "a Philosopher, a fine Lady, and a Gallant Officer form a triangle in one corner; a Maccaroni, a Poet, a Divine, a Beauty, and an Ottaheite Savage, a wondrous Pentagon in another."[32] The Pacific "Savage," here, acts as a gauge of the extraordinary diversity of British bluestocking society: its all-encompassing reach. Yet if the individuals within this diverse social network appear to interact on terms of equality, this is, Montagu suggests, a "wondrous" and temporary state, brought about by the central gravitational power of Vesey, around whom the triangles and pentagons seem to orbit. "[E]very one," she writes of the miscellaneous list of guests, "does his best to please the Lady of the enchanting room."[33]

The chivalrically-inspired trope of the polite hostess's quasi-supernatural authority, it has been argued, attributed to elite women like Montagu and Vesey a peculiarly feminine form of cultural power, in this case over a social milieu which seemed to include the whole globe.[34] Cowper adopts this convention in his poem on the feather panels. The woven diversity of feathers on the walls, he suggests, represents the social and intellectual mixture of "Strong Genius," "Imagination," "Wit," and "Well-tutor'd Learning" taking place in the room below.[35] Yet this is less the project of equal individuals than a series of tributes paid to the central figure of the hostess/ artist, for whom "The Birds put off their ev'ry hue/ To dress a room for MONTAGU."[36] The first stanza

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31. See Michelle Hetherington (ed.), *Cook and Omai: The Cult of the South Seas* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001).

32. Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey (13 November 1778). Qtd. in Blunt, vol. 2, 58.

33. Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey (13 November 1778). Qtd. in Blunt, vol. 2, 58.

34. See Major, 84.

35. "Feather-Hangings," ll. 23, 27, 31, 37.

36. "Feather-Hangings," ll. 1–2.

sets up Cowper's central conceit of Portland Square sociability as an involuntary but pleasurable homage to "the Lady of the enchanting room," as "wondrous," he imagines, as if wild birds were to offer her their own feathers:

> The Peacock sends his heav'nly dyes,
> His *Rainbows* and his *Starry eyes*;
> The Pheasant, plumes which round infold
> His mantling neck with downy gold;
> The cock his arch'd tails' azure show;
> And river-blanch'd the swan his snow,
> All tribes beside of Indian name
> That glossy shine or vivid flame,
> Where rises, and where sets the day,
> Whate'er they boast of rich or gay
> Contribute to the gorgeous plan,
> Proud to advance it all they can.[37]

This passage offers its own subtle tributes to Montagu's erudition in its italicised references to *Paradise Lost*[38] and echoes of Orpheus charming wild animals. Cowper goes on to compare the birds' feathers, kept safe from "ev'ry storm that blows," and the human guests who "To the same Patroness resort/ (Secure of favour at her court)."[39]

Cowper's focus on the visual and physical luxuriousness of the feathers, though, suggests that he is not only interested in them as metaphors for sociability or conversation, but also as exotic material. Luxuriantly listing birds, Cowper seizes "the opportunity to display the trophies of empire," as Jonathan Bate has argued of the catalogue of exotic plants in *The Task*.[40] Montagu, here, is not only the recipient of intellectual and social compliments, but of apparently gratuitous material imports: like Joseph Addison's celebrated woman of fashion, "The Lynx shall cast its skin at her feet to make her a Tippet; the

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37. "Feather-Hangings," ll. 3–14. Original italics.

38. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), edited by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2004), Book 7, l. 445.

39. "Feather-Hangings," ll. 18, 21–22.

40. Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 10. See also Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters 1760–1820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 168–97.

Peacock, Parrot, and Swan, shall pay Contributions to her Muff."[41] Like these, the contributions to Montagu's "gorgeous plan" have global origins. In particular, they are ascribed to "tribes […] of Indian name" — a phrase which tends to conflate exotic animals with exotic native cultures (such as those of Hawaii), as sources of the opulent material goods imagined as flowing spontaneously towards the metropolitan centre. Most obviously, this echoes Alexander Pope's vision of "feathered people" flocking to London in instinctive response to the city's global moral and cultural pre-eminence.[42] For Cowper, this pre-eminence seems to be embodied in the civilizing, benevolent form of a wealthy British lady.

Hanging over cosmopolitan gatherings in Portland Square, the featherwork can be seen as functioning in a similar way to painted allegories of the four continents which appeared in other semi-domestic spaces of British power, such as the ceiling of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich or the dining room at Osterley Park, Middlesex (which was paid for by diamond imports, banking and East India Company shares). Similar images provided decoration and moral justification for the practical and didactic projects of maps, atlases, and geography textbooks. On the ornate frontispiece of Thomas Bankes' *New System of Geography* (1787), for example, the apotheosis of the dead Cook, representing the newly global reach of science and navigation, is placed behind a foreground group of feather-decked women representing Africa, Asia and America. These women offer gifts — "[w]hate'er they boast of rich or gay," perhaps — to the hostess-like figure of Britannia.[43] Such allegories, with Europe in the centre receiving homage, feminise and sentimentalise the imperial global view, flattening varying and sometimes coercive economic relationships into a scene

41. Joseph Addison, *Tatler* no. 116 (5 January 1710), in *The Tatler*, edited by Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. 2 of 3, 125.

42. Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest* (1713) in *Selected Poetry*, edited by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1996), 20–32, l. 404. See Felicity Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003), 140–42.

43. James Naigle and William Grainger after Johann Ramberg, "Neptune Raising Captn Cook up to Immortality." Engraved frontispiece to Thomas Bankes, *A New and Authentic System of Universal Geography* (London: C. Cooke, [1788]). For an image and brief analysis of this picture, see Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1992), 234–35.

of free, sociable exchange between decorative young women.[44] In Beth Fowkes Tobin's words, in this early imperialist discourse, the "warm and fecund regions of the world are Britain's obedient servants, whose tributes are their natural riches."[45] By concealing much of the human agency and labour involved in the production of the feather panels — the influence of imported Hawaiian artifacts, for example, as well as the roles of those who caught and killed the birds or plucked and wove their feathers — Montagu and Cowper seem to further mythologise these imperial and class relationships as a semi-supernatural, free and harmonious movement of "natural riches" from the four continents to the metropolitan centre.

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I have argued that a contemporary viewer, as they gazed at the feather panels during an "elegant fête" or read about them in the press, would have faced a dazzling surface which announced Montagu's wealth, taste, and status, but also celebrated a concept of British civilisation as the central economic and cultural metropolis, profiting quite naturally and appropriately from the global periphery. This concept, however, did not go unchallenged by eighteenth-century metropolitans. The belief, expressed by Addison and Pope, that Britain had the right to exploit the resources of the periphery, was facing a particular crisis during the years of the panels' conception, production, and display. The discourses of British power I have briefly discussed were being undermined, and radically transformed, by issues including "the scandal of empire" in India,[46] the loss and continuing prosperity of the American colonies, and anti-slavery campaigning. Montagu herself opposed the slave trade and could be critical of many aspects of British activity abroad, although these concerns rarely seemed to trouble her

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44. For other examples of this allegorical trope, see Joseph Roach, "The Global Parasol: Accessorizing the Four Corners of the World" in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, edited by Felicity A. Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 2003), 93–106; Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art 1700–1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 12–30.

45. Fowkes Tobin, 1.

46. Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

general confidence in the fitness of the Enlightened British ruling classes to rule the world.

In relation to the new Pacific theatre of colonial expansion, in particular, rhetoric of British empire as a force of civilisation and trade had to compete, in metropolitan newspapers, books and pamphlets, with dissenting voices which associated it instead with corruption, violence, waste and disease. "Colonization," wrote the *Whitehall Evening Post* in a report on Cook's last expedition, "has been a raging epidemical madness, which, it is hoped, will now be effectively cured, as it will, like a putrid fever, kill where it is not cured."[47] If a viewer caught a reference to Hawaii in the form and colours of Montagu's featherwork, it would have been difficult to forget these islands' darker associations in the metropolitan imagination. The figurehead of Pacific exploration, Cook had been killed while attempting to take hostages on a Hawaiian beach in 1779, soon after he was presented with the most spectacular cloaks and *mahiole* in Lever's collection. The fashionable Hawaiian room in Lever's museum, in which these artifacts were displayed, was hung with a solemn inscription reminding visitors of his death.[48] The presence of Pacific peoples and objects in London, then, could symbolize not only the pre-eminence but also the rapacity, corruption and violence of the metropolis and its interactions with the periphery. It had been "the unfortunate fate of poor Captain Cook," commented an anonymous pamphleteer with heavy irony, to be "very cruelly and inhumanly butchered, for nothing more than ordering his crew to fire on a banditti of naked savages; who seemed to look as if they had a right to the country in which he found them."[49] Cook was only the most famous fatality in the violent encounters between a Hawaiian culture reputed savage and cannibal, and European crews whom Cowper, for one, regarded as characterised by "persevering cruelty" rather than Enlightened ideals.[50]

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47. *Whitehall Evening Post* (29 January 1780).

48. *School-Room Party*, 11.

49. *A Letter from Omai to the Right Honourable the Earl of (xxxxxxxx). Translated from the Ulaietean tongue* (London: J. Bell, 1780), 24.

50. William Cowper to John Newton (30 October 1784), in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*. Vol. 2, *1782–1786*, edited by James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 290.

Elsewhere, Cowper portrayed Mai — Montagu's emblem of the global tribute paid to cosmopolitan fashionable sociability — as a victim of the "curiosity […]/ Or else vain glory" of his metropolitan hosts.[51] Cowper's anxious disavowal of the British Pacific adventures about which he loved to read is one example of his double "attraction to the cosmopolitan empire and his grasp of its human cost," described more broadly by Julie K. Ellison.[52] The "odd tension," which Major notes in Cowper's poem on the feather panels, may reflect this ambivalent attitude towards the human and material spoils of empire which they represent. The poet's established persona as "uniquely the poet of the status and rights of animals,"[53] passionate pet-owner, and elegist of finches draws attention to the more sinister aspects of his metaphor: the presumed death (or at least significant suffering) of the birds who are sacrificed to Montagu's "gorgeous plan."[54] It is telling that the third line of the poem includes the words 'heaven' and 'dyes'; and that, while the beginning of this stanza echoes *Paradise Lost*, its last lines recall the conclusion of *Lycidas*, or indeed any number of consolatory elegies produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, promising that the lost subject was now safe in heaven or the grave, "screen'd from ev'ry storm that blows."[55] Feathers could be associated with luxury and cosmopolitanism, but also with the presence of death and sacrifice. They could be the by-product of sport, farming, scientific research or the keeping of exotic pets but most birds were trapped and slaughtered. Indeed, the display of these objects in Portland Square was an early manifestation of a fashion for exotic feathers which would culminate in one of the first popular animal conservation campaigns.[56] Montagu herself, many years earlier, had described her "remorse" at the killing

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51. William Cowper, *The Task* (1785) in *The Task, and Selected Other Poems*, edited by James Sambrook (London: Longman, 1994), Book 1, ll. 634–35.

52. Julie K. Ellison, "News, Blues, and Cowper's Busy World" in *Modern Language Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2001): 219–37, 226–27.

53. . Vincent Newey, "Cowper Prospects: Self, Nature, Society" in *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, edited by Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 41–56, 47.

54. "Feather-Hangings," l. 13.

55. "Feather-Hangings," l. 18.

56. See Robin W. Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975); Moira Ferguson, *Animal Advocacy and Englishwomen, 1780–1900: Patriots, Nation, and Empire* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1998), 7–74.

of a single kingfisher, shot by her father for a feather collection, while a donor of peacock plumes to Montagu's project in turn demanded "comfort […] at the death of a beautiful bird."[57]

Cowper's views, then, were by no means unique among educated metropolitans. I would like to conclude by suggesting that the latent tensions in his poem admit the possibility of an alternative, more sceptical eighteenth-century reading of the feather panels. This reading, I think, would have interpreted Montagu's feathers as exotic commodities, while retaining an awareness that their value derived from concealed histories of labour and waste. As Joseph Roach has explained, for metropolitan viewers and consumers, feathers were not only "exotic tokens of otherness," but also emblems of the loss of life necessary to manufacture this exotic Other within the metropolis:

> As a material object, the feather marks an act of violence: what it cost to produce was the original wearer's life, and what it served to dramatize was the predication of overarching symbolic systems on the material basis of waste.[58]

Applied to Montagu's feather panels, Roach's semiotics of feathers suggest that the material qualities and origins of the panels may have different effects on their interpretation from those Montagu had intended.

They might have acted as a reminder, for example, that the wealth, status and cosmopolitan tastes of the white woman that they celebrated came at a price; and that the feathers' provenance included colonial ecological exploitation as well as free elite sociability. These objects, the *General Evening Post* noted, had been "snatched […] from the feathered tribe,"[59] a description which referred both to their origins as the body parts of birds, and to their status as an artform appropriated from 'savage' peoples in order to promote British superiority. Symbolising and exploiting an abundant and modern global culture centred in the metropolis, Montagu's woven feathers seem to have

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57. Elizabeth Montagu to the Duchess of Portland (19 September 1739); James Barrington to Elizabeth Montagu (16 December 1790), both qtd. in Elizabeth Eger, "Paper Trails and Eloquent Objects: Bluestocking Friendship and Material Culture" in *Parergon* 26, no. 2 (2009): 109–38, 128, 130.

58. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1996), 125, 131.

59. *General Evening Post* (28 May 1791).

Figure 1: *'Ahu 'ula* (Woven feathers and plant fibre cloak made in Hawaii, c. eighteenth century). © Trustees of the British Museum

effectively aestheticized economic, cultural and social relationships. Yet by encoding notions both of desirable luxury and violent loss, they might also provide a material embodiment of the anxieties and contradictions of Montagu's cosmopolitanism.