

MEETING THE “OTHER” BODY: PHYSICAL ENCOUNTERS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN’S TRAVEL BOOKS

ABSTRACT

Al centro di questo lavoro sono libri di viaggio di scrittrici del Settecento letti dal punto di vista della rappresentazione del corpo. L’ipotesi da cui si parte è che lo sguardo femminile sul corpo altrui si rifletta anche nella consapevolezza del proprio corpo. Dal *corpus* di testi studiato, che include solo resoconti di viaggi al di là dei confini dell’Europa (Behn, Justice, Montagu, Vigor, Kindersley, Schaw, Craven, Falconbridge, Parker, Fay), emerge insieme all’urgenza di problemi etici quali la schiavitù, la forte consapevolezza di questioni legate alla propria cultura di origine.

This paper addresses eighteenth-century women’s travel writing outside Europe from the perspective of their representation of the (foreign) body. The assumption is that while gazing at the others’ bodies, women were forcing themselves into a perception of their own bodies as clearly distinct from or as cognate to the foreign ones. The examples provided aim at showing how the representation of other bodies calls for an acknowledgment of domestic cultural issues, whether the debate is on ethical problems like slavery or over the social status of women, or simply over codified cultural symbols. Behn, Justice, Montagu, Vigor, Kindersley, Schaw, Craven, Falconbridge, Parker, Fay constitute the corpus of authors considered, all of them recording travels to far away unusual destinations.

This paper intends to provide examples of the way the (other) body is represented in travel books written by eighteenth-century women travelers outside the confines of Europe – quite a limited corpus, given the relative exceptionality of women then traveling long distance voyages. Excluding Europe, and in particular Italy, from the selection restricts the number of scrutinized volumes, but the topic of British ladies on the Grand Tour has already received critical attention and the high degree of physicality involved in their perception of travel has already been fore-grounded.¹

This survey tries to evaluate recurring elements that point to the body as the site of a confrontation wherein conflicts of personal and collective identities are emphasized and

¹ Critics of the Grand Tour have noticed a sense of proud superiority British female travelers experienced while “on the road”, compared to the frequently emphasized (relative) idleness of Italian ladies. The ascension to the Vesuvius was exploited as an example of such physical boldness in the second half of the eighteenth century, as discussed by SWEET 2015, pp. 54-61, while the crossing of the Alps had always been experienced as a challenge, as testified by Lady Montagu’s comments («I intend to set out to morrow to pass those dreadful Alps, so much talk’d of. If I come alive to the bottom you shall hear of me») on her way back from Turkey (Turin, Sept. 12, 1718: MONTAGU 1965, I, pp. 434-435); a feeling she was to record at every subsequent crossing in 1739, 1740, 1741, *ivi*, II, pp. 147-150, 197, 203, 258 and in 1761, *ivi*, III, p. 198.

eventually worked out. The genre seems to be particularly fit to enact the implications of bodily experience enhanced by a mobility the bodies of women were obliged to come to terms with, as traveling became a more common practice in the course of the century. In the world of modern women, to start traveling required that both political and behavioral limits were overcome, and the body appeared as the first boundary to be dealt with.² And the farther the voyage, the more challenging the experience of difference.

The choice to address women's travel writing derives from the understanding of their reports not so much as an ethnography of foreign landscapes or artifacts and customs, but rather as a more or less explicit portrait of foreign bodies: while gazing at the latter, women were at the same time forcing themselves both into movement and into a perception of their own bodies as clearly distinct from or as cognate to the foreign ones.

A few quotations serve as introduction: those from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), an allegedly autobiographical novel that incorporates travel, regard two types of "other" bodies, those of the natives of Surinam – (a) and (d) –, and those of the eponymous African royal slave, Oroonoko and of his wife Imoinda – (b) and (c) –; (e) is from Mary W. Montagu's *Letters from Turkey* (1717, pbd 1763) and includes a famous description of the naked bodies of Turkish women at the public baths.

(a) Some of the Beauties which indeed are finely shap'd, as almost all are, and who have pretty Features, are very charming and novel; for *they have all that is called Beauty, except the Colour*; [...]. They are extream modest and bashful, very shy, and nice of being touch'd. And *though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among 'em, there is not to be seen an indecent Action, or Glance*; and being continually us'd to see one another so unadorn'd, so like *our first Parents before the Fall* [...] And these People represented to me an *absolute Idea of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin*. [...].³

(b) This great and just Character of Oroonoko gave me an extream Curiosity to see him, especially when I knew he spoke French and English, and that I cou'd talk with him. [...] *He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy'd: The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turn'd from Head to Foot*. His Face was not of that brown, rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony, or polish'd Jett. His Eyes were the most awful that cou'd be seen, and very piercing; *the White of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His Nose was rising and Roman*, instead of African and flat. *His Mouth, the finest shap'd that cou'd be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so noble, and exactly form'd, that, bating his Colour, there cou'd be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome*. There was no one Grace wanting, that bears the Standard of true Beauty.⁴

(c) [...] a Beauty that, to describe her [Imoinda] truly, one need say only, she was Female to the noble Male; *the beautiful black Venus, to our young Mars*; as charming in her Person as he, and of delicate Vertues.⁵

² GRUNDY 2007, pp. 179-193.

³ BEHN 1997, pp. 9-10. Emphasis mine in all quotations.

⁴ Ivi, p. 13.

⁵ Ivi, p. 14.

(d) *They were all Naked, and we were Dress'd, so as is most commode, for the hot Countries, very Glittering and Rich; so that we appear'd extremely fine; my own Hair was cut short, and I had a Taffaty Cap, with Black Feathers, on my Head; my Brother was in a Stuff Suit, with Silver Loops and Buttons, and abundance of Green Ribon; this was all infinitely surprising to them, and because we saw them stand still, till we approach'd'em, we took Heart and advanc'd; came up to 'em, and offer'd'em our Hands; which they took, and look'd on us round about, calling still for more Company; who came swarming out, all wondering [...]. By degrees they grew more bold, and from gazing upon us round, they touch'd us; laying their Hands upon all the Features of our Faces, feeling our Breasts and Arms, taking up one Petticoat, then wondering to see another; admiring our Shoes and Stockings, but more our Garters, which we gave 'em, and they ty'd about their Legs, being Lac'd with Silver Lace at the ends [...].*⁶

(e) *I was in my travelling Habit, which is a rideing dress, and certainly appear'd very extrordinary to them, yet there was not one of 'em that shew'd the least surprize or impertinent Curiosity, but receiv'd me with all the obliging civility possible. I know no European Court where the Ladys would have behav'd them selves in so polite a manner to a stranger. I believe in the whole there were 200 Women and yet none of those disdainful smiles or satyric whispers that never fail in our assemblys when anybody appears that is not dress'd exactly in fashion. They repeated over and over to me, Uzelle, pek uzelle, which is nothing but, charming, very charming. The first sofas were cover'd with Cushions and rich Carpets, on which sat the Ladys, and on the 2nd their slaves behind 'em, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any Beauty or deffect conceal'd, yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest Gesture amongst'em. They Walk'd and mov'd with the same majestic Grace which Milton describes of our General Mother. There were many amongst them as exactly proportion'd as ever any Goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shineingly white, only adorn'd by their Beautiful Hair divided into many tresses hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or riband, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces.[...] In short, 'tis the Women's coffee house, where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented etc. [...] The Lady that seem'd the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undress'd me for the bath. I excus'd myself with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in perswading me. I was at last forc'd to open my skirt and shew them my stays, which satisfy'd'em very well, for I saw they believ'd I was so lock'd up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my Husband.*⁷

All the quotations deal with the bodies of the travelers,⁸ but also betray anxiety about the European travelers' bodies, which appear to be under the observation of the travelers themselves; all – directly or indirectly – discuss the travelers' consciousness of their own bodies or, rather, of what envelops their bodies. In (d) and (e) (a novel and a travel letter) in point of fact the opposition is between beautiful bodies and beautifully elaborate clothes, so that the cultural systems of symbols of the travelers are highlighted as codified, mainly represented in terms of fashion, and the body is actually annihilated by the superstructure of the social rule and role. Perhaps, in Montagu's case, also a consciousness of the frailty of her own body surfaces, devastated by the smallpox.

As for quotations (a) and (d), although they actually describe the same “object” (the natives of Surinam), the former is offered as an objective, factual description – the

⁶ Ivi, p. 48.

⁷ MONTAGU 1965, pp. 313-314.

⁸ PRATT 1992 popularized the term to define the people under the observation of the Europeans.

traveler/narrator simply acting as the historian providing a kind of background introduction – while the latter is a report of an experience actually lived out by the same traveler/narrator, and provides an eyewitness chronicle that includes the feeling of being the objects of the natives' observation rather than those who went there *to see the natives*. Both Behn (d) and Montagu (e) are of course interested in what they are describing (Western and Eastern unfamiliar worlds, respectively), but at the same time they are also very conscious of the interest *they* arouse *because of the way they* look while they are describing the people who are the object of their gaze. Considering not only the gaze of the traveler, but of the travelee as well, therefore, allows for traveling to be transformed into a transitive action.

Montagu's description of female naked bodies as Italian and English artifacts (e) almost amounted to denying their corporeity: however, by contemporaries it was read as either «failure of delicacy» in reporting it, or failure of integrity in inventing it.⁹ Some twenty years after the publication of Montagu's letters (1763), Elizabeth Craven, traveling in the same area, in a letter from Vienna dated December 14, 1785, bluntly put in an extraordinary accusation against Montagu, denying her authorship but literally «in parenthesis as if she is asserting a commonly held truth» and thus universalizing a conflict that was blatantly personal: an example of «an Orientalist anxiety of influence»: «but must observe, that whoever wrote L.M-----'s Letters (*for she never wrote a line of them*) misrepresents things most terribly».¹⁰

Craven's own preoccupations with identity and body authenticity are, however, first and foremost self-reflexive. From the very first pages of her Dedication she stresses how the publication of her travel book is meant to authenticate her own body as the body of the true Lady Craven, and to denounce that the body of another woman traveling with her former husband Lord Craven in a different direction is now masquerading herself as «Lady Craven»:

Besides curiosity, my friends will in these letters see at least for some time where *the real Lady Craven has been*, and where she is to be found – it having been a practice for some years past, *for a Birmingham coin of myself* to pass in most of the inns in France, Switzerland, and England, *for the wife of my husband* – My arms and coronet sometimes supporting, in some measure, this insolent deception.¹¹

When she describes Oriental women, as in her visit to the harem, she acknowledges their natural beauty, but at the same time she points out some failure in their posture, or in their excessive use of makeup (elaborate and rich in inverse proportion to their intellect):

⁹ GRUNDY 2007, p. 138.

¹⁰ CRAVEN 1789, letter XXVIII from Vienna, December 14, 1785. The topic is complicated by the fact that spurious letters attributed to Mary Wortley Montagu had actually been published, and three of them were from Vienna. That is probably why Craven chose Vienna to discredit Montagu's authorship. Such aspects of the Montagu-Craven rivalry are thoroughly discussed in WINCH 2014. The quotations above from p.98. Other comments available in MITZI 2008, pp. 19-38 and in LANDRY 2000, pp. 51-73.

¹¹ CRAVEN 1789, Dedication.

I have no doubt but that nature intended some of these women to be very handsome, but white and red ill applied, their eye-brows hid under one or two black lines – teeth black by smoking, and an universal stoop in the shoulders, *made them appear rather disgusting than handsome*. The last defect is caused by the posture they sit in, which is that of a taylor, from their infancy.¹²

The reader is led to believe that she is competing with the object of her description by promoting her own body as the superior example of beauty. By pointing out the other women’s physical flaws, here and elsewhere, she thus positions herself as a seductive opposite – at least to her addressee.¹³

Both Montagu for all her philosophy and high culture, and Lady Craven for all her aristocratic stance, are almost obsessed with bodily experience and actually seem to be constantly concentrated on physicality. Whether this took the shape of admiration or of disgust, it is bodies that attract their comments. Montagu’s reaction to Muslim African women is very different from and less well known than her Turkish experience but is worth quoting as an instance of Montagu’s racial hierarchy, which has apparently taken hold of her as she is on her way back from the Oriental experience. Her sojourn there is in a way being reassembled during the voyage back (she had traveled out by land and is now going back by sea, stopping on the way). The comments are in the only letter written from Tunis:

We saw under the Trees in many places Companys of the country people, eating, singing, and dancing to their wild music. They are not quite black, but all mullattos, and *the most frightfull Creatures* that can appear in a Human figure. They are *almost naked*, only wearing a piece of coarse serge wrap’d about them, but the women have their Arms to their very shoulders and their Necks and faces adorn’d with Flowers, Stars, and various sort of figures impress’d by Gunpowder; *a considerable addition to their natural Deformity* [...] While I sat here, from the Town of tents not far off *many of the women flock’d in to see me and we were equally entertain’d with viewing one another*. Their posture in siting, the colour of their skin, their lank black Hair falling on each side their face, *their features and the shape of their Limbs, differ so little from their own country people, the Baboons, tis hard to fancy them a distinct race*, and I could not help thinking there had been some ancient alliances between them.¹⁴

Anticipating some of Craven’s comments, also the less aristocratic Jemima Kinderley has sharp comments to make on San Salvador beauties in the first part of the series of letters (68) where she recorded her long voyages with her husband, an officer of the East India Company, from 1765 to 1769. One of the first women from Britain to travel through three continents (Canary Islands, Brazil, Cape of Good Hope, India) and to publish a travel narrative of her experiences, she describes female beauty and youth but also underlines how easily they are spoiled: «Many of them, when they are quite young, have delicate features and persons, but there is a certain yellow tint in

¹² Ivi, letter XLIX.

¹³ LANDRY, p. 62.

¹⁴ MONTAGU 1965, vol. 1, pp. 425 and 427, to Abbé Conti [July 31, 1718]: Montagu’s *nostos* is accompanied by comments, echoing Joseph Addison’s earlier contrast between classic and present Italy, on the contrast between the majesty of the ruins of Carthage and the misery of the present, which also involves the inhabitants.

their complexions which is disagreeable, and beside they look old very early in life»;¹⁵ not to mention the Brazilian women's tendency to cunning: «brought up in indolence, and their minds uncultivated, their natural quickness shows itself in cunning».¹⁶

Many of the authors discussed here comment on their physical easiness while traveling, stating how their bodies react while engaged in observing the new world. Some even seem to be feeling *better* while in movement than when at rest. Of course, during the long distance voyages the forced immobility of the accommodation, together with the lack of comfort, cleanliness and privacy, or noisome smell, are reported as spoiling the adventure. But some make the best out of it anyway, especially middle-class travelers, as Elizabeth Justice, who was obliged by financial difficulties to leave home and children to become a governess at Mr. Hill Evans' in St Petersburg for three years. She not only boldly published her travels with her name on the cover, and chose a very naïf title in order to attract buyers: she actually offered an original account of the way the middleclass Russians lived in the 1730s, after the death of Peter the Great. Refusing to speak about her work experience, she provided instead the materials of sea voyages and of daily life, like food and drink and washing habits. A physical vision from below that invites the reader to consider her total involvement in the experience.¹⁷

A very peculiar gaze is offered by well-connected Janet Schaw, an educated upper-class Scot, who started with her brother and the three adolescent children of a family friend from Scotland in 1774 to reach North Carolina, where her elder brother ran a plantation. On board the ship, all space is shared and no privacy allowed,¹⁸ and the movement of the waves hinders Janet's capacity to write: «this shocking rough Sea, in which we are tumbling about so, that I can hardly hold the pen».¹⁹ But she knows better, as her opening words testify: «I have laid in a store of resolution to be easy, not to be sick if I can help it, and to keep good humour, whatever I lose; and this I propose to do by considering it, what it is, merely a Voyage».²⁰ The long oceanic passage is described in the most vivid bodily particulars relating to the different passengers, and she scrutinizes her body's changes as the environment modifies. The great comfort of being finally able to wash when by the Tropics the weather gets warm is recorded in some detail: «Tis a very solemn ceremony; when we are to leave the cabin in our bathing dress, all the people quit the deck, and remain below till we return».²¹ During the voyage, they stop in Antigua where she reports, in a matter-of-fact way, on the practice of being offered to drink by the servants in a way that avoids any possible contact

¹⁵ KINDERSLEY 1777, online edition, letter 10 (<http://travel-letters.org/kindersley/items/show/10>).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ JUSTICE 2010, p. 12 and pp. 17-22. In the same turn of years also Mrs Vigor wrote from Moscow and St Petersburg a series of letters, but delayed their publication (anonymous) until 1775. Her vision is from above, her book portraying the court society she was admitted to as the British consul's wife. VIGOR 1775.

¹⁸ SCHAW 2005, pp. 19, 20, 22, 25. The anonymous manuscript of this text remained unpublished until the early XXth century.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 30.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 20.

²¹ Ivi, p. 69.

with them: «[the water] is presented to you in a Cocoa nut shell ornamented with Silver, at the end of a hickory handle. This is lest the breath of the Servant who presents it should contaminate its purity». ²² On a similar line is the casual comment on one of the ladies she visits there, Isabella Hamilton, and her black mulatto girl: «She had standing by her a little Mulatto girl not above five years old, whom she retains as a pet. This brown beauty was dressed out like an infant Sultana, and is a fine contrast to the delicate complexion of her Lady». ²³ On the whole, Schaw seems to be accepting the tropical environment better than the local Creoles: although she praises their beauty, she states «they want only colour to be termed beautiful [...] owing to the way in which they live, entirely excluded from proper air and exercise», ²⁴ and proudly comments on her becoming a «brown beauty»: «I have always set my face to the weather; wherever I have been. I hope you have no quarrel at brown beauty». ²⁵ Schaw proves to have an interesting relationship with her body, and almost never worries about her feminine propriety («draw a picture of your friend in this situation and see if ‘tis possible to know me! [...] You have formed a very wrong idea of my delicacy; I find I can put it on and off like any piece of dress») ²⁶ in a context – America on the eve of the war of Independence – that was rather troubled. She was a royalist and slave trade supporter; however, she betrays an independent stance as to behavior and, once she settles in North Carolina, her consciousness of her clothed body appears intolerable:

Let it suffice to say that a ball we had, where were dresses, dancing and ceremonies laughable enough, but there was no object on which my own ridicule fixed equal to myself and the figure I made, *dressed out in all my British airs with a high head and a hoop* and trudging thro’ the unpaved streets in embroidered shoes by the light of a lanthorn carried by a *black wench half naked*. No chair, no carriage – good leather shoes need none. *The ridicule was the silk shoes in such a place.* ²⁷

Moving in the opposite direction a few years later, in 1779 Eliza Fay of modest upbringing also complained about the difficulty of dealing with her writing apparel while on board the ship that took her from Leghorn to Egypt and in the last stretch by sea to India.

When we reached Ceylon the wind became contrary, which together with a strong current, kept us upwards of three weeks beating off the Island, before we could weather Point de Galle. This will account to you for my letter being scarcely legible. – *I am at this moment writing on my knees in bed*, and if I had not been contented with this method all the way, I could not have written at all. ²⁸

In general, however, she underlines the positive feeling of being lulled by the waves, that counterpoint to her emotions, and feels much safer when she is moving than when

²² Ivi, p. 111.

²³ Ivi, pp. 123-124.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 114.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 115. A discussion of complexion in COLEMAN 2003; see also BOHLS 1995.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 201.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 154.

²⁸ FAY 1817, p. 158, letter XIII.

they are residing somewhere. All in all she tries to make the best of her time on board the “Nathalia” bound to Calicut, Kerala, as she carefully describes her activity of sewing and learning shorthand writing while traveling.²⁹ Writing out of financial necessity,³⁰ Fay’s letters sound a very different note from Montagu’s or Craven’s from the Eastern area, or from what most of the lady travellers to India were later to represent.³¹ Her gaze on the Eastern world is more earthly than any of the previous enchanted visions of the Orient,³² due to the conditions she travels in, without the privileges of diplomacy or aristocracy. Everything is experienced directly and gets under her skin, as it were. Writing from Calicut, she reports for the first time about «the state of dreadful captivity in which we have long been held [...] our sufferings, which have been extreme, both in body and mind, for a period of fifteen weeks, which we have spent in wretched confinement, totally in the power of Barbarians».³³ When they are taken prisoners, she describes the way in which her husband conceives a stratagem to conceal their watches in her elaborate hairdo:

having first stopped their going by sticking pins in the wheels; and *the little money we possessed, and what small articles I could take without exciting suspicion, were concealed about my person*. Thus equipped *I crawled out, bent double*, and in an instant, the Cabin was filled with Sepoys. I must here pause, and intreat my dear sister to imagine herself in my situation at that *dreadful* moment; for no language can I find, that would do justice to my feelings (p. 118).

This, and subsequent experiences, signal to the reader how her point of view is rather from below, and provides us with a contact with the early settlements of that British class of officers that was to constitute the basis for the Anglo-Indian community.

Most of the texts analysed take in whole groups of people as the objects of the European gaze, rather than the single body, and that frequently enhances a disturbing effect. Anna Maria Falconbridge’s travelogue is a case in point: her perspective betrays her social uncertainty, caught as she is between the modesty and privacy demanded of her social status,³⁴ and the fact of appearing publicly in the press. An ambiguity stated since the Preface, spoken in the third person, as if she tried to set up a distance between the traveller/author and the independency implicit in the act of writing.

The Authoress will not imitate a threadbare prevailing custom, viz. assure the Public, the following letters were written without any design or intention of sending them into the world; on the contrary, she candidly confesses having some idea of the kind when writing them, tho’

²⁹ Ivi, p. 108, letter XI.

³⁰ She died in Calcutta, in 1816, while preparing her letters for the press.

³¹ GUPTA-CASALE 2007.

³² However, the enchantment lurks here and there, as in her description of Madras in letter XIV «rather resembling the images that float in the imagination after reading fairy tales, or the Arabian nights entertainments, than anything in real life; in fact Madras *is* what I conceived Grand Cairo to be, before I was so unlucky as to be undeceived», FAY 1817, p. 162.

³³ FAY 1817, p. 110, letter XII. 12th February 1780.

³⁴ A woman of the merchant class (her father, Charles Horwood, was a clock maker in Bristol and possibly involved in the slave trade), she married very young and probably against her family’s opinion Alexander Falconbridge, ship surgeon on slave ships and later turned abolitionist.

her mind was not fully made up on the business ‘till towards the beginning of April,—nay, for some time before then (*from a consciousness of the inability of her pen*) she had actually relinquished all thoughts of publishing them, which determination she certainly would have adhered to, if her will had not been overruled by the importunities of her friends.³⁵

Although she does not particularly complain about discomfort during the voyage, the prospect of remaining on board the ship once they arrive in Sierra Leone³⁶ is so disturbing to her that she describes herself as enslaved within the ship, sharply conscious of bodily uneasiness. The fantasy of imprisonment she describes sounds incongruous *vis-à-vis* the situation of the Sierra Leone, a slave colony:

Conceive yourself *pent up in a floating cage*, without room, to walk about, stand erect, or even to lay at length; exposed to the inclemency of the weather, having your eyes and ears momentarily *offended by acts of indecency, and language too horrible to relate*—add to this a complication of filth, *the stench from which was continually assailing your nose*, and then you will have a faint notion of the Lapwing Cutter.³⁷

Falconbridge invites the reader to connect her sense of captivity within her hastily contracted marriage (Letter i) and her entrapment in the ship (Letter iii). When she lands, however, her traveller’s gaze resumes its quickness: selecting details of the colony, she repeatedly alternates between confidence and modesty, curiosity and the necessary bashfulness that was expected of a Lady’s behaviour, as in the following brief exchange of gazes:

*The people on the island crowded to see me; they gazed with apparent astonishment—I suppose at my dress, [...]. Seeing so many of my own sex, though of different complexions from myself, attired in their native garbs, was a scene equally new to me, and my delicacy, I confess, was not a little hurt at times.*³⁸

The same insistence on «delicacy» regards an episode in which the tension between her desire to experience some sort of adventurous emotion and the expectation of modesty that her correspondent(s) elicit from her requires that Falconbridge downplays her own involvement in “male situations” she finds herself in. The topic is the bodies of the slaves:

Delicacy, perhaps, prevented the gentlemen from taking me to see them [the slaves]; but the room where we dined looks directly into the yard. Involuntarily I strolled to one of the windows a little before dinner, without the smallest suspicion of what I was to see;— judge then what my astonishment and feelings were at the sight of between two and three hundred wretched victims, chained and parcelled out in circles, just satisfying the cravings of nature from a trough of rice placed in the centre of each circle. Offended modesty rebuked me with a

³⁵ FALCONBRIDGE 1999, p. 47. She is also conscious of contributing interesting and updated information and comments to the literature of travel.

³⁶ Her husband did not want her to land and share her time with slave owners on the colony and insisted that she remained onboard the ship. A thorough analysis of the text and its cultural implication is in FERGUSON 1997.

³⁷ FALCONBRIDGE 1999, p. 54.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 53.

blush for not hurrying my eyes from such disgusting scenes; but whether fascinated by female curiosity, or whatever else, I could not withdraw myself for several minutes—while I remarked some whose hair was withering with age, reluctantly tasting their food — and others thoughtless from youth, greedily devouring all before them; be assured I avoided the prospects from this side of the house ever after. Having prolonged the time ‘till nine at night, we returned to our floating prison.³⁹

Occasionally, the tension between delicacy and curiosity is relaxed in a sort of comic register, as in the episode involving the King and Queen of the natives. The King is described in a parody of European elegance, accompanied by the author’s feminine fantasy of mending his socks and the accompanying fear of pricking his skin and thus hurt his sacred body:

We went on shore, and rather caught his Majesty by surprize, for he was quite in dishabille; and at our approach retired in great haste. I observed a person pass me in a *loose white frock and trowsers*, whom I would not have suspected for a King! if he had not been pointed out to me. [...] After setting nigh half an hour, Naimbana made his appearance, and received us with seeming good will: *he was dressed in a purple embroidered coat, white sattin waistcoat and breeches, thread stockings, and his left side emblazoned with a flaming star; his legs to be sure were harliquined, by a number of holes in the stockings, through which his black skin appeared.* [...] They then shook hands heartily, and Naimbana retired, [...] but presently returned dressed in a *suit of black velvet, except the stockings*, which were the same as before. I often had *an inclination to offer my services to close the holes: but was fearful lest my needle might blunder into his Majesty’s leg, and start the blood*, for drawing the blood of an African King, I am informed, whether occasioned by accident or otherwise, is punished with death: the dread of this only prevented me. [...] [The Queen’s] head was decorated with two silk handkerchiefs; her ears with rich gold ear-rings, and her neck with gaudy necklaces; *but she had neither shoes nor stockings on.*⁴⁰

In spite of the fascinating destination, the last text analysed – a report of the first transatlantic voyage to Australia written by a woman – offers less interesting comments on foreign bodies. A book recording the long voyage MaryAnn Parker took with her husband to reach Botany Bay with convict ships and supplies for the newly founded colony, it hardly mentions the convicts (probably above 1000), or the natives of New South Wales: naked, rather ugly and smelly, these are only observed from a distance – as a group – and kept separate by armed guards that follow the European ladies every time they make an excursion.⁴¹ Parker however bravely and constantly downplays difficulties like storms and other fears and apologizes for her «slender remarks» compared with those by «authors of knowledge and taste»,⁴² thus creating an overall good

³⁹ Ivi, p. 58.

⁴⁰ Ivi, pp. 58, 60 and 63.

⁴¹ PARKER 1999. The establishment of a British colony in New South Wales was a military undertaking, with the Governor and all senior officials being naval or military officers. Generally, wives were not encouraged to accompany their husbands. The absence of women, apart from female convicts, accounts for the lack of any first-hand reports by women in the early years of European settlement in Australia, and makes Parker’s travelogue all the more interesting.

⁴² Parker follows closely in Watkin Tench’s travel report, the officer in the First Fleet that voyaged to Botany Bay (he was in charge from 1787 to 1792), even in the rousseauvian positive attitudes to

humored atmosphere. But for our discussion the closing paragraph remarkably foregrounds an interesting note on a woman’s body. *A Voyage round the World* (1795), closes on the following image of the writing-and-nursing mother:

Early the next morning, [...] I took chaise, and arrived in town at 8 o’clock the same evening, where I had the happiness of again embracing an affectionate mother, and a little daughter, who is at this present time one of my greatest comforts; my other child, a boy, had died during my absence. [...] This little boy is of the number of those for whose benefit [...] I have taken the liberty to set forth this narrative; humbly hoping that my kind readers will pass over the many faults with which it abounds, when they reflect that *it was written under the pressure of mind*, occasioned by the unexpected loss of [...] an indulgent husband, and a tender parent. *The youngest of these fatherless children is an infant of seven months, who has chiefly been on my left arm, whilst the right was employed in bringing once more to my recollection the pleasing occurrences of fifteen months [...].*⁴³

The examples provided are meant to prove how the representation of other bodies constitutes a fundamental site for the acknowledgment of domestic cultural preoccupations, whether the debate is on ethical problems like slavery or over the social status of women, or simply over clothes as the exterior mark of class and cultural difference.

Discourses of sensibility started to enter the domain of fiction in the 1740s and definitely assessed themselves from the 1760s, highlighting the reciprocal influence of travel books and novels. Sensibility being rooted in the nerves, written in and on the body, it is first and foremost a question of bodily sensation and as such not erasable from women’s travelogues, where it is precisely the experience of movement that makes the body perceivable and perceived as a physical subject.

If it is true that bodies are subjected to both lore and laws, because they are not simply regulated through formal legal processes but are parts of broader cultural processes, and thus have a material, substantial reality, also the meanings of the bodies are rather facts of culture, far from fixed.⁴⁴ This is why the opening of new scenes for inspection to travellers who moved to recently discovered areas of the world implicitly called in to question the description of new bodies but also the recognition of one’s own body.

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the natives, but does not acknowledge him. TENCH 1793.

⁴³ PARKER 1999, p. 220.

⁴⁴ BAINHAM – DAY SCLATER - RICHARD 2002, Introduction by Shelley Day Sclater, p. 1.

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