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Review of Shell's "Wampum and the Origins of American Money"

Paul Otto

George Fox University, potto@georgefox.edu

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Wampum and the Origins of American Money. By Marc Shell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 184 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

"In the beginning," wrote John Locke, "all the World was America." Were the author of *Wampum and the Origins of American Money* to pen these words, he would likely replace "America" with "wampum." This is overstated, but not by much: Marc Shell's short book is a wide-ranging exploration of language and currency, with a whimsical, allusive approach that allows him to traverse much territory. It is engagingly written, entertaining, and raises provocative questions throughout. Readers of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, however, may find the book disappointingly fleeting in its discussion of wampum and particularly its role in Native American society. The operative premise of the book is that wampum was a Native currency which Europeans "adopted"; as Shell explains, they later "adapt[ed] those currencies according to their own traditional practices" (1). After establishing colonies in Indian country, Europeans—at least the Dutch and English—adopted wampum as a fiduciary currency in place of specie. Once the leap from specie to currency was made, it was an easy step to adopt paper money or "paper wampum," first in 1690 and then more or less continuously after that (2). Shell argues that this paper money was emblazoned with images of Native Americans, an expression of cultural imperialism and an effort to assuage European guilt by memorializing the indigenous origins of paper money.

Opening with the idea that "commercial exchange really matters to civilizations and how they change," Shell asserts that when coinage emerged in the ancient world, it was accompanied by philosophy, which he connects to "linguistic representation" and new political orders. The "same historical transition in the realms of economics, language, and political power took place" during the encounter of Europe and North America, and he contends, "for understanding this transformation, the key term would be wampum" (1). From there, Shell weaves a rich tapestry of connections between currency, linguistics, and political developments, as he draws on literature from diverse disciplines over a broad period of time. Key to Shell's approach is defining currency

or “numismatic objects” broadly. Insofar as readers may disagree with the wide scope he adopts, they may find it difficult to accept this book’s argument. Among such monetary artifacts he lists “shells and wampum belts, coins, banknotes, bank records, treaties, drawings, photographs, recordings.” Indeed, his intent is to connect “money and language” rather than to see them as “discrete categories” (3). This makes for an intriguing study, but the author does not sufficiently establish a theoretical basis for conflating these two concepts, leaving many questions about why the two are or should be associated, what distinguishes them, if anything, and how exactly wampum plays into this. More specifically, other than asserting that wampum served as currency among Native people, the author never brings evidence to prove as much.

Furthermore, associating wampum with currency in aboriginal practice significantly misses current understanding of Native culture as it existed before contact and ignores a generation or more of scholarship, even as the author avers that twentieth-century scholars have fairly well ignored wampum as a topic of study. Shell seems to adopt without question the assertions of nineteenth-century writers who presumed wampum to be Indian money. This seems ironic, since he questions the “scientific” objectivity of other nineteenth-century scholarship such as the *American Journal of Sociology* (57). George Hamell’s publications, in particular, have been foundational in the current understanding of historic wampum. His work in archaeology, anthropology, and folklore, as well as his association with Iroquois communities in New York State, has well established him as an authority in this field, but Shell ignores Hamell’s findings.

To be fair, the author does address the opposing argument that wampum was not Native currency when he suggests that anthropologists uncomfortable with the idea of wampum as money asserted that “wampum was often ornamental and money cannot be ornamental” (94). However, his response that many cultures employ “monetary tokens” as ornaments misses the point. Wampum was a highly prized, ceremonial item. It was used for decoration, yes, but its fundamental role in Native society was one of social cohesion. A vast array of religious ceremonies, social engagements, and diplomatic interactions were rooted in the use of wampum. This fundamental aspect of wampum in helping people relate to one another and in providing a means for social intercourse and discourse does, in fact, have interesting parallels to currency that are worth pursuing, but Shell brings neither ethnohistorical insights nor cross-cultural analysis to bear on such questions.

Historians and social scientists likely will find Shell’s allusory style intriguing and unsatisfying at the same time. At one level, although impressive, Shell’s use of language and the connections he draws is simply word play. As scholarly analysis, it’s disappointing. Where one looks for causation, he offers coincidence; where one looks for interpretation, he offers interpolation. Such creative connections are woven throughout, but to give a sense of the logic they follow, imagine making the claim that Marc Shell’s authority to speak on wampum rests in the association of his last name with the raw materials used to make wampum.

Although the occasional minor error can be found in most works, several scattered throughout this book further indicate the author’s thin grasp of the historical

particularities of the topic. For example, the author identifies Mohawks and Iroquois as two separate peoples, and Abnaki, Algonquin, and Ojibwa are listed as Iroquoian instead of Algonquian languages (1, 37). The colonies of New York and New Jersey are equated with New Amsterdam, the town that becomes New York City, and New Netherland, the Dutch colony encompassing both New York and New Jersey (38). Later, the author calls the Dutch colony New Holland (61). Shell's lengthy discussion of animate and inanimate genders in Algonquian ignores linguistic studies that suggest instead a division of noble and base or high and low genders (48). Such studies further argue that no animistic worldview is in play with such genders (see Ives Goddard, "Grammatical Gender in Algonquian," for example). Shell also incorrectly cites the case of the Native representatives meeting Colonel Bouquet in November 1764 as an example of Indian people requesting copies of diplomatic exchanges with Europeans (52); claims that Europeans introduced human, as opposed to animal, scalping (65); and overstates the scope of wampum factories among Europeans and Native Americans (77). He confuses the Dutch East India Company with the Dutch West India Company (94), and he equates Roanoke beads with wampum beads (97).

Many of these mistakes result from Shell's heavy reliance on secondary sources. He has certainly read widely, especially in the nineteenth century, but much of wampum's story is still submerged within the deep waters of the primary sources, and the author cruises over this rather than diving into it. Furthermore, his reading of the nineteenth-century sources seems to miss their own historical context. The story of currency and paper money in the United States is an interesting one, and he cites political comment, economic theory, and editorial cartoons that resulted from the nineteenth-century debates, but so far removes them from their historical context as to render them nearly meaningless, at least for the purposes of historical inquiry.

Finally, despite the volume's title, Shell's discussion of wampum does not begin until the middle of the book and is never undertaken in any substantial way. Wampum is more of an idea than a material artifact in this book, and the idea of wampum provides Shell with a launching pad to engage in what amounts to an intellectual romp through culture, economy, and society, touching here and there on many interesting connections, but never settling down in any focused way on the topic at hand. The book is richly illustrated and the narrative moves effortlessly between history, myth, philosophy, and literature, but in the end, it's more intellectual entertainment than sustained scholarly inquiry.

Paul Otto

George Fox University