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Accounting for Mary Fowler Occom

The Nature of the Account

Accounts may seem like strange objects for pursuing hidden literacies, especially the alphabetic and numerical literacies of Native women. Accounts seem removed from the rich world of Native women’s knowledge of many linguistic and material systems: of Indigenous languages, basket-construction and the designs that adorned them, and the design of wampum strings and belts, to name a few. Accounts, moreover, seem to distance readers from the people who made and used them: accounts are designed to foreclose rather than open up interpretation. They present columns of debts and credits that ideally support one conclusion—how much a customer owes a merchant, or a shop owner’s profit over a given period of time. Accounts enumerate and record by distilling transactions among multiple people into neat columns of goods and numbers, purchases and payments, allowing a bookkeeper to see at a glance the status of their accounts. It’s often hard to locate speakers, writers, experiences, or selves in accounts, and this is no mistake: accounts are made to make and trace objects. It is objects’ circulation and exchange that fuels the entries on the page and the list’s completion or closure. So accounts obscure or sometimes outright lack the elements that scholars are trained to seek and interpret: narrative, plot, the sentence, aesthetic qualities, even a signature.

This account also obscures the person who selected and paid for the objects listed. It lists expenses charged to the Mohegan man Samson Occom by the New London, Connecticut, merchant Thomas Shaw between November 1765 and May 1767. But during this period, Samson Occom was in England, where he was securing donations in support of a mission school run by Eleazar Wheelock, as well as preaching, advocating for Mohegan land rights, meeting the

king, countesses, and influential religious leaders, and seeing what he calls "many Curiosities," including the "Kings Lions Tygers Wolf and Leopards &C."[1] Samson's absence means that his wife, Mary Fowler Occom, purchases the items from Shaw, while she is living at Mohegan, Samson's home community and one with which Montaukett people like the Fowlers had long-standing relations. Mary married Samson in 1751 during the time when he served her community as a teacher, healer, and minister, and the couple lived on Montauk until 1764, when they paddled across the Long Island Sound and moved to Samson's home at Mohegan. In 1765-67, while Samson is encountering curiosities and British royalty, Mary Occom is managing a recalcitrant son, instructing her daughters—probably teaching them to read—and managing her household, which at that point included seven children.

Approaching the Account

I want to pose two ways for approaching this page of accounts, in order to ask not only what hidden literacies it might illuminate but also what literacies readers need to approach accounts relating to Native women. These two approaches can be characterized as looking *through* and looking *at*. Together, they illuminate not just Mary Occom's knowledge of reading and writing in English but her interaction with various forms of communication and the capacious meanings that accounting had in the eighteenth century.[2]

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[1] "Samson Occom, journal, 1765 November 21," *The Occom Circle*, Dartmouth College Libraries, https://collections.dartmouth.edu/occom/html/diplomatic/765621-6-diplomatic.html.

[2] There is at least one more approach to the account, that would follow scholars like Ann Laura Stoler by reading "along the archival grain" to examine how the account might illuminate the workings, anxieties, and shortcomings of colonial power. Given the colonial obsession in the eighteenth century with accounting for Native people's actions, histories, spiritual and mental states—for example, Eleazar Wheelock's work to collect his students' writings in order to display their progress or lack thereof to funders—this is a mode of reading has much to reveal about the contexts in which Mary and Samson Occom interacted with ministers and merchants. But I want to sideline this reading for now, in order to focus on the question what we can learn about Montaukett women's literacies through the account. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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Method One: Looking Through

The first method—that of "looking through" the account—positions documents as what Laura Murray has called "unique windows" into an encounter or situation. Murray notes that this is a "literary" method "in the service of a historical goal." Reading vocabulary lists of words from Native languages made by colonial officials, Murray seeks to use those lists to gain insight into the lived contexts and ideological frameworks in which they were created. Scholars have effectively looked through many such documents to recover Native voices and actions even in texts that are not created to represent them, and I want to draw on this method to imagine how we might read the account as a glimpse into Mary's life.[3]

By looking through, we can trace several threads through the account: one thread might highlight the purchases of pork, rice, oats, cheese, and sugar with which Fowler Occom fed her children—and perhaps other Mohegan people—while Samson was in England. We can surmise based on the women's shoes, flannel, and oznabrigs (an inexpensive linen cloth) that Mary purchased items to make clothing for herself and her children. We can see from the tea, coffee, and rum she bought that she participates in the circum-Atlantic exchange of commodities made from American plants. And we can see that she purchases technologies of literacy, from ink and an "ink pott" to paper. Finally, in 1765, she pays some of her debt in cash, and in June 1766, she receives a credit "by a pot returned."

The pot returned may reflect Mary's increasing need in Samson's absence, for this is a moment when Eleazar Wheelock, who sent Samson to England, has failed to fulfill his promise to provide for the Occom family (he then attempts to blame Samson for their destitution—see

[3] Laura J. Murray, "Vocabularies of Native American Languages: A Literary and Historical Approach to an Elusive Genre," *American Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2001): 591.

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Hilary Wyss's fantastic reading of these events and of Wheelock's letters).[4] By the early months of 1766, Shaw was refusing to "supply" Mary, likely because Wheelock had failed to provide supplies or credit with which to make purchases. In this context, the pot returned might suggest a creative or perhaps desperate act to obtain food and clothing, indicating the edge of financial precarity on which the family lived.

Mary was no stranger to this precarity and to the ways that colonial accounts created it. In Samson's autobiographical narrative, drafted shortly before his departure for London, he astutely surmises that the Company for the Propagation of the Gospel paid him less than its white ministers "because I am [a] poor Indian." Samson wrote that narrative to provide what he calls a "Short Plain and honest Account of my self," and to correct the "many gross mistakes in [others'] Accounts," namely false claims that he had used his money extravagantly or that he was lying about his level of education or his Mohegan identity. Accounts, Occom's autobiography makes clear, are often used against him and other Native people, to justify placing them in debt—as the family was when he was in England—or to level false claims against them. The "pot returned" points to the actions Mary took to alter a situation in which, once again, the men tasked with paying her husband had failed to do so. Reading through the account gives us a sense not only of Mary's needs and actions but also of her interactions with colonial systems of accounting—and purposeful miscounting.

Method Two: Looking At

Let's turn now to the second way we might read the account, by moving from looking *through* to looking *at*. This reading considers the account as a material object, one that was

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[4] Hilary E. Wyss, *English Letters and Indian Literacies: Reading, Writing, and New England Missionary Schools, 1750-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), chap. 1.

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carefully stored and regularly taken out and updated to reflect purchases and payments. Here I want to suggest that we think about Mary as a participant in its creation and use, even if she does not write the account itself. Looking *at* requires that we account for literacy as encompassing not just the ability to read, write, or calculate, but also an understanding of the social power of texts and ability to use textual objects accordingly. This knowledge is what Karen Weyler has called a "functional understanding of literacy" which she describes as an understanding of how print worked and how to access it. Functional literacy allowed people with a range of relations to reading and writing to participate in print culture. As Weyler writes: "By participating in the conventions common to popular genres, outsiders, including people of color, found ways to enter into particular kinds of discourse communities and to frame their experiences so that they could be understood by readers whose social, economic, and legal circumstances were fundamentally unlike their own."[5]

The term "functional understanding of literacy" might seem a misfit here: Mary's account with Shaw isn't printed, nor is it made or intended to circulate in a printed public sphere; its circulation is probably limited to Shaw and perhaps his shopkeepers, the Occoms, probably Wheelock, and the people who settled Shaw's estate upon his death. But we can expand Weyler's "functional understanding of literacy" to encompass a range of interactions with textual objects, including reading and writing as well as other interactions with paper, ink, letters, and words. These myriad uses for writing and reading are relational and require moving among them rather than placing them into hierarchies or selecting one over another.

Expanding literacy to include myriad interactions lets us think about accounting in capacious ways—going beyond numbers tallied on a page to the ways that people defined a debt

[5] Karen Weyler, *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 17.

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and kept track of debts owed and paid. We can pay attention to the many Native people who had a functional understanding of how record keeping and making worked—whether in alphabetic orthographies or other forms—and an understanding of the power of a page of accounts as a representation of exchanges. Looking *at* thus offers an avenue for conceptualizing literacy in ways that attend to Native peoples' diverse experiences of and relations to textual matter.

Writing and Literacy

Mary Occom used writing and literacy in several ways, from penning a letter to refusing to write in English. She writes some letters to Wheelock, and she sometimes signs her name with an X in a letter to Wheelock written by his financial manager. While some scholars have read this signature as raising the question of Mary's own literacy in English, I want to ask instead how Mary's interactions with various forms of literacy might signal how and to what ends she uses paper, writing, signatures, and so on.[6] She undoubtedly understood how accounts of multiple forms worked and how to interact with them. She sent a letter to Wheelock on November 8, 1766, just after the account with Shaw begins, asking for help with her son Aaron, who "trys to run me in dbt by Forging orders." The letter is brief, and she tells Wheelock that "being in haſte cannt write So much as I would, but the bearer here of Squib, is an Honeſt man & will Speak the truth, and he can relate the whole."[7] Later, when Shaw refuses to sell supplies to her, Mary writes to Wheelock's daughter to inform her of the family's needs and to elicit her assistance in the absence of her father's support. These letters show that Mary is aware of the power that deceitful or forged orders can have and of the ways that writing can affect colonists' accounting, perhaps by convincing them to reverse a refusal to sell goods or by stimulating

[6] Mary was Occom's student during his period as a teacher at Montauk, so it is very likely that she could read and write.

[7] "Mary Fowler Occom, letter, to Eleazar Wheelock, 1766 November 8," *The Occom Circle*, https://collections.dartmouth.edu/occom/html/diplomatic/766608-2-diplomatic.html.

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actions they might take to fulfill their promises to pay debts. Reading these letters alongside the account with Shaw positions that document as one reflecting Mary's understanding of forgery and debt, and actions she took to ensure that the account lists only items she actually bought. We might linger again on the "pot returned": perhaps the return indicates Mary's correction of a forged order, or perhaps a decision to pay off a debt she calculated she could not pay otherwise. These letters suggest that the account with Shaw is one that Mary carefully curated to ensure its correctness, one she had a hand in shaping, not just through purchases but by monitoring expenses and contesting forged orders.

And Mary accounts not just for goods and money but also for feelings—she interacts with accounting as both a numerical and an affective project, one meant to extract both money and gratitude from Indigenous people. A January 1767 letter from Samson suggests she find a "Capable Hand to write you Letters of thanks, to the Ladies who wrote you Letters, and sent you Preſents from Briſtol."[8] Perhaps Samson makes the suggestion that she find an amanuensis because Mary preferred not to write her own letters, or perhaps she was in haste as she was when she wrote to Wheelock, the letter shows that Mary must negotiate the forms of colonial accounting that involve measuring and accounting for thanks. Whether she found a "capable hand" or wrote letters herself, Samson's letter points to the ways that she made strategic use of other peoples' hands to settle her accounts.

For Mary, accounting extended to her transactions with Shaw and to expectations from Wheelock and British ladies, and these interactions illuminate her astute understanding of how accounts work, how she might use them to ensure accurate records, and how they might be used

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[8] "Samson Occom, letter, to Mary Occom, 1767 January 21," *The Occom Circle*, https://collections.dartmouth.edu/occom/html/diplomatic/767121-diplomatic.html.

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by colonists to exact both money and gratitude. Reading for both linguistic content and for such interactions not only brings into view Mary Occom's various forms of literacy but also situates her as part of larger histories of literacy throughout the northeast. For example, Lisa Brooks's work on Pocasset women like Weetamoo shows how they keenly observed how colonists used land deeds, noting the distance that often opened up between an agreement, a written record, and colonists' actions in defiance of that agreement. We might also think of the young Pequot woman Katherine Garrett, who gave an account of her life that contested narratives of guilt and degradation before she was executed for alleged infanticide.[9] These Native women maintain an understanding of how colonists used accounts, debts, exchange, and circulation, often to ends that were detrimental to Native communities and individuals. As Mary's account shows, interventions in those ends were often small, quotidian acts that aimed to circulate alternate interpretations of and uses for accounts. Such literacies are hidden, not so much because of obscure archives or uncatalogued texts (Mary's account with Shaw is catalogued as part of Samson Occom's archive at Dartmouth and digitized as part of the *Occom Circle Project*), but because they involve forms of use and literacy that require new readerly practices to see them.

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[9] Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) and "The Confession and Dying Warning of Katherine Garret," in Eliphalet Adams, *A Sermon Preached…On Katherine Garret* (New London, 1738).

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