

## Textile Tropes in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*

John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* examines relations between the British Empire and its colonial holdings. Steffler recognizes the binarism that has traditionally defined such a relationship, which Abdul R. JanMohamed characterizes as the

manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. . . . a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object. (JanMohamed 82)<sup>1</sup>

To establish these binaries in his novel, Steffler chose textiles tropes as appropriate metaphors for and within intersecting cultures. The events described in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* take place between 1770 and 1819, a time of expansion for the British Empire. This expansion was largely motivated by textiles—the processes which produced them, and their value as marketable commodities. The centrality of thread and cloth, wool and silk, to Imperial England is evident in the nomenclature of the era: the Industrial Revolution is also called the Textile Revolution and is usually cited as beginning with the invention of the spinning jenny in 1767. Though now an anachronism, every use of the term “Silk Road” for the main trading route across Asia reiterates the importance of the silk trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus textiles supply a system of images particularly apt for the period covered in Steffler's book

The complex adaptability of textile metaphors further recommends them

as signifiers for the often ambiguous intercultural situations that arise in Steffler's novel. His depiction of the colonized/colonizer relationship is not so strictly circumscribed as either that described by JanMohamed, or the extension of JanMohamed's premise posited by Terry Goldie. Like JanMohamed, Goldie recognizes basic oppositions in literary depictions of the colonizer/colonized relationship, but Goldie goes on to point out that in contemporary literature, "[s]uch an opposition is frequently between the 'putative superiority' of the indigenes and the 'supposed inferiority' of the white . . . . [T]he positive and negative sides of the image are but swings of one and the same pendulum . . ." (Goldie 10). But Steffler's textile tropes enable him to construct and then question binaristic representations through ambiguities inherent in the tropes themselves.

Unlike the oppositions listed at the end of the JanMohamed quotation (to which I would add "male" and "female"), textiles do not lend themselves to immediately recognizable binary relationships. Alignments can be constructed by the author, and then contradicted such that, instead of simply reversing polarity, the opposed meanings combine to exemplify a complicated and subtle interaction between attributes otherwise considered mutually exclusive. This complex interaction more closely resembles Homi Bhabha's articulation of the situation of the English text in a colonial setting, than it does the analysis offered by JanMohamed or Goldie.<sup>2</sup> According to Bhabha's article "Signs Taken For Wonders," the English book, epitomized by the Bible, is emblematic of the split in colonial presence: "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (Bhabha 107). The colonial situation depicted by Steffler seems to have more in common with a Bhabha-ian ambivalence than the distinct binarism of JanMohamed and Goldie.

For example, textile-related imagery delineates and differentiates each of the cultures depicted in the text by providing a means of measuring their relative technological sophistication. Cartwright's brother Edward invents a power-loom for Britain's industry (188); Devika is a seamstress and weaver in the Indian village which uses traditional hand-powered tools and techniques to produce uniforms for the soldiers of the British Raj (45). Finally, the Inuit of Labrador trade for thread and needles, basic sewing implements which their culture cannot easily produce (161, 193). Instead of identifying the Inuit through an indigenous but artificially-produced crafting as in the

other cultures, Steffler opposes a “natural” textile—Caubvick’s hair—to the Empire’s manufactured cloth. However, long before the introduction of Caubvick as a character, readers encounter a mention of her hair which conflates the natural/artificial binary:

Black plumes pulled sideways in the wind. Cartwright has seen so many over the years, over the landscape, from chimneys and tall stacks. Coal mines, cloth mills, breweries. The cooling towers at Marnham, on top of his old house. These glimpsed pillows and skeins often seem to detach themselves from their settings and come after him. Shapes like faceless banshee women, black rags streaming, hovering over his head. Reminders of Caubvick’s hair. (20)

With this statement, Caubvick’s hair becomes a symbol not just of Labrador or the New World or any colonized land: it signifies the destruction of the landscape at the very heart of empire, in England itself. Thus, at the outset of the text, the differentiation between colony and empire, between natural and civilized, is questioned through a textile trope. The important distinction is not one of geographical or sociological boundaries but of exploitation for the sake of a capitalist, rather than political, hegemony. Just as the colonies are abused in order to provide resources for raw materials and markets for manufactured goods, so the original dominion suffers reprehensible damage in the name of industry.

Numerous episodes in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* similarly delineate the trade in textiles as metonymic of the complex interactions between colonizing and colonized cultures. This article details a close examination of the two main textile tropes in the narrative—clothing and Caubvick’s hair—first showing how their depiction is paradigmatic of the oppositions outlined by JanMohamed, and then the ways in which Steffler’s novel questions those binaries to indicate the complex and often ambiguous interdependencies which resist reduction to opposing duality. By thus constructing and then problematizing binaries, Steffler appears to transform the manichean duality that JanMohamed isolated as defining the colonizer/colonized relationship.

**P**robably the most common use of textiles in Eurocentric literary tradition is to describe clothing in order to place characters in a social or cultural hierarchy. Steffler’s book offers no exception to this rule: the Englishmen wear complex uniforms while the Englishwomen are noted for their equally extravagant silk dresses (i.e. 40, 68, 269). These signifiers of the upper echelons of the Empire’s hierarchy are not without

inherent hybridity. Silk was produced only in the orient, so the very material of the imperial emblems comes from an Other state. The same is true of the men's clothing: in India, Devika weaves muslin (45) for the use of the English military. Thus, the only English part of the British uniforms is the tradition behind the design. Their physical construction places them not as products of the industrial heart of empire, but of craftspeople and cultures indigenous to the marginalized colonies. Steffler depicts Cartwright as having an intuitive understanding of this intercultural ambiguity: entranced by the interminable monotony of the ocean voyage to India, he "doubted his memories of the land. He closed his eyes and waves invaded every image that came to mind. The hills above Marnham had been merely painted on silk, a thin layer swaying over bottomless depths" (32). The interdependence of colonizer and colonized—implied by Cartwright's vision of the English countryside painted on imported cloth, and confirmed by the hybrid nature of the English citizen's clothing—indicates an ambivalence, an uncertainty as to the source of authority, precluded from the stark binaristic construction elucidated by JanMohamed.

However, this type of ambivalence interests Homi Bhabha. In the clothing which signifies empire—as in the book, which does the same according to Bhabha (107)—authority rests in difference, and originality is a function not of invention but of repetition in a context different from the origins (of the uniform, of the book), a context which therefore requires the presence of signifiers of the colonizer's authority. Steffler draws on the precept of authority-in-difference by carefully constructing a hierarchy of textile images associated with the colonies depicted in the novel. It is in those colonized lands technologically similar to England that the British citizens in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* are most concerned with maintaining the symbolic difference/authority expressed by clothing, no matter how uncomfortable and inconvenient. In India, the English soldiers are

forbidden to go out of the fort in anything but their regulation uniforms. Many times Cartwright packed his long limbs into a small palanquin and had himself jogged through the dust to some fragrant garden party, sweating and cursing in his braid-loaded coat. (40-41)

Similarly, when Cartwright retires from the army and takes a woman to Scotland, she spends most of her time taking care of her silk dresses and underwear, and looks down upon the Scottish neighbours because they are dressed in "[w]ool shawls from head to toe" (87). Bhabha suggests that "the

representation of colonial authority depends less on a universal symbol of English identity than on its productivity as a sign of difference" (108). This statement is borne out in Steffler's text, in which the representatives of the Empire maintain the fashions of the "homeland" in India and Scotland. The English costumes, however inappropriate, unequivocally indicate a difference privileged by economic hegemony: for example, Scotland's domestically produced wool is considered far less prestigious than imported silk.

The dress codes of the Empire—not necessarily set in England but a product of the interaction between colonizer and colonized—maintain the authority of difference which keeps the English on the top of the textile-delineated social and economic hierarchy. George Cartwright contravenes these conventions: he does not bow easily to the rules of England when they do not apply to the climate or terrain of the colony, as the quotation cited above affirms. Thus the use of clothing to indicate social hierarchy is questioned. Though he conforms to the mandate to maintain difference when he must, Cartwright prefers his attire to be comfortable rather than symbolic, providing another example of an intermediate position which contradicts a strictly manichean construction of colonizers' relationship to colonies.

Steffler portrays British fashions occupying the highest point of the Empire's textile hierarchy, while the second tier is represented by cultures like those of Scotland and India, identified by untailed but woven or knitted cloth. Though the Cameron ladies' wool shawls (87) and the sari which Devika so frankly unwinds before Cartwright (45, 48, 52) denote a fairly complex textile technology, these signifying items are not tailored at all, which differentiates them from the English uniforms and dresses. Nor has Steffler entirely equated Scotland and India in his manipulation of textile tropes. The Indian woman is first introduced with a description of her hair: "Devika had long black hair in a braid" (45). The colour and length of this innate textile align her with the Inuit Caubvick, but the fact that it is braided—one braid, not an elaborate English coiffure—places her somewhere between the Inuit and the English. The Cameron ladies have no equivalent connection to the Inuit, which leads to the circumstantial conclusion that though Scots are below English, they are slightly above Asian on the textile-delineated pyramid.

At the bottom of this pyramid stand the Inuit of Labrador. They have no looms, dress in fur and skins, and Cartwright describes them as in need of civilizing (127). Steffler reiterates Cartwright's unquestioning faith in the

Empire when he tells Mrs. Selby that “. . . the thought of you clothed in a silk gown in the midst of this wilderness fills me with pride, and a sense of victory . . .” (158). But it is in the wilderness of the “New World” that the hybrid possibilities of cultural cross-dressing are first realized.

He [Attuiok] gave Cartwright caribou socks, sealskin boots and mitts. Mrs. Selby borrowed a parka from Ickconogoque and copied its design. Always inventive, Cartwright made modifications of his own, attaching various flaps of wool and fur to the garment Mrs. Selby made for him, so that he could cover or uncover parts of his face and neck as the weather and his exertions required. Because he would often walk twenty or more miles in a day on snowshoes, he found Inuit trousers too warm, and instead wore thick wool breeches and woolen wrappings below the knees. (133)

The intermediary garb of Cartwright and Mrs. Selby signifies their difference from both the Inuit and the Europeans. “Many stories about them and their odd appearance circulated among the people who sailed the Labrador coast in the late 1700s” (164). Cartwright’s inventiveness suggests an originality on his part which supersedes the condoned “originality” of empire, that of repetition within a new context. Thus, Cartwright’s clothing becomes truly hybrid, according to Bhabha’s definition: “[t]he hybrid object . . . retains the actual semblance of the authoritative symbol but revalues its presence by resiting it as the signifier of *Entstellung*—after the intervention of difference” (Bhabha 115, italics in original). Although practical in Labrador, Cartwright’s clothing is never more than an idiosyncratic costume in the eyes of both the Inuit and the Europeans, partly because of the “process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition” (105, Bhabha’s definition of *Entstellung*), which produced it.

This cultural cross-dressing provides a literalization of Derridean double-inscription: “whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke . . . [the] double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth” (cited in Bhabha 108). In this case, the items so treated are not texts but textiles: it is Inuit clothing which is “re-inscribed” by the imagination of Cartwright, who cannot help but infuse such a re-inscription with the values of the culture within which he was raised, because “one’s culture is what formed that [one’s] being” (JanMohamed 84). Cartwright’s production of, and delight in, his hybridized costume provides a further example of his unconscious ambivalence towards the Empire which he represents in Labrador.

Bhabha suggests that the inevitable result of double inscription is “a ‘transparency’ of reference. . .” (108), and Steffler’s textile imagery provides an almost comically literal translation of one of Bhabha’s premises. Before Cartwright leaves Labrador with his Inuit friends, “rags of fire” (Steffler 199), energy unharnessed for any industrial or cultural purpose, destroy the main lodge and its contents, including “all their clothes” (199). Transparency indeed!

Briefly the untamed nature of the wilderness has ascendancy over the representatives of Empire. In the end, though, the fire’s destruction changes nothing: Cartwright and his people contain the blaze, bring it under control, and even use the heat, grilling steaks over red-hot gun barrels pried from the destroyed building (200). Cartwright is briefly in the position of being virtually naked in the garden, but, just as he summarily rejects Mrs. Selby’s proposed plan to settle in Labrador (195), he fails to notice the opportunity to completely abandon the Empire which the fire affords him. Though textile hybridity has occurred, it does not indicate abrogation: difference—between England and Labrador, between English and Inuit—is maintained despite the fact that the representatives of the Empire compromise their signifying costumes. Such is also the case when the Inuit go to England, although the implications of textile hybridity for the Inuit in England are far more serious than those of the English in Labrador. One of the first events to occur in England is the ordering of two new sets of clothing:

Cartwright brought in a tailor and had them [the Inuit] measured for English attire so they could go out in public undisturbed. He also bought bolts of woolen and flannel cloth, beads and embroidery thread, and brought some furs from the warehouse where his own supplies were stored. Ickconogouque and Caubvick studied the cloth, considering colours and weights, then set about cutting and stitching new clothes for the family, garments they trimmed with beads and furs in exquisite style. Their old sealskin clothes, which they’d worn all through the crossing, they cut up and burned in the fireplace when there was a good draft. (208)

The Inuit have one set of clothing to allow them to become incognito, to fit in, in a manner that the English avoid in India and Scotland. The second set of clothing is designed by the Inuit to look like authentic Inuit clothing, though it is made largely out of English material, just as the most authentic English dresses are made out of Oriental silk. Thus the carefully constructed, textile-delineated hierarchy begins to unravel: the more technologically advanced colonies were placed above the Inuit because they had

weaving, but they do not tailor their clothing. However, evidence that the Inuit women are capable seamstresses, though they have not developed a loom, is mounting: the Inuit want to trade for needles and thread (161, 193); they make their own “authentic” costumes in England; and when Cartwright first wears his hybrid outfit to the Inuit camp in Labrador, the women “examined it closely, criticizing the stitches” (191). This realization leads to the suspicion that the distinction between colonies is imposed from one source: Scotland, India and Labrador are all “Others,” defined not by the variance amongst themselves but by their difference from England.

A comparison of the Inuit’s burning their old, non-hybrid clothing when new, hybrid English/Inuit costumes become complete, with the burning of Cartwright’s clothes in Labrador reveals both similarities and divergences. In both cases, the principals are largely unaware of the ramifications of their actions: just as Cartwright does not realize that the accidental loss of his clothing provides the possibility of more completely adopting the Inuit way of life, so the Inuit—especially Caubvick—do not realize the symbolic ramifications of deliberately destroying the clothing which pre-dates the colonial encounter. Aspirations for material success, symbolized by increasingly hybridized clothing, cause both Cartwright and Caubvick to serve the Empire: in this, the manichean construction outlined by JanMohamed seems inadequate to describe the subtle workings of imperial power. However, the material repercussions of this servitude are far more serious for the Inuit woman than for the Englishman. He simply fails to achieve his ambitions, but her entire society is devastated, literally changed beyond knowledge. In terms of the two instances of burnt clothing, the initial congruities indicate the veracity of the first part of Bhabha’s statement that “[t]he place of difference and otherness, or the space of the adversarial . . . is never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional” (109), while the differing implications for the Inuit and the Englishman indicate that the space of difference is characterized by “a pressure, and a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization. . .” (109). Steffler’s depiction of that “pressure and presence” provides the reader with constant reminders that, no matter how subtly represented, the authoritative difference between colonizer and colonized is maintained throughout the colonial relationship.

The dynamic of imperial authority remains in place despite friendship and goodwill between individuals from the different cultures. Though



Cartwright says of Attuiok “I never loved a man more than him” (236), when the Inuit is dying, the Englishman fails to notice the duplicity of his double-cross dressing while attending Attuiok. The doctor prescribes a red environment for those afflicted with smallpox, so

l]n Plymouth, for a shilling, Cartwright bought a scarlet foot-soldier’s coat, like the kind he used to wear. He wore it as he crouched and entered the red light of the tent where Attuiok lay. . . . Attuiok looked at Cartwright, then closed his eyes. “So,” he said, “you were a soldier all along.”

“This is just for the colour,” Cartwright said. (235-6)

The conclusion that Attuiok draws, based on his recognition of the colonizer’s uniform, is correct. Cartwright was, and still is, a soldier for the Empire, though even Cartwright does not realize the extent of his service. The ideology of ambition, of regaining his family’s traditional wealth and social position, drives Cartwright to trade, not to settle in Labrador. This choice makes him as much a scion of the Empire as the most fashionably dressed nobleman in London.

**T**hough the English can don hybrid apparel in Labrador without severe repercussions, such is not the case for the inverse situation—that of Inuit in England. Caubvick’s experiences in and after England illustrate the peril which marginalized Others face when they aspire to the trappings of Empire. In order to fully comprehend Steffler’s assessment of what is at stake when the Inuit woman trades her sealskins for silk, the pivotal significance assigned to an indigenous textile trope must first be explored. If the British have their dresses of European cut and Oriental cloth, the Inuit have Caubvick’s hair.

Initial analysis of Caubvick’s hair as trope seems to show that it simply acts as a symbol within the Eurocentric literary convention of identifying colonized peoples with nature:

[t]he indigene is often used to present the possibility of nature in a human form. In the same way, the indigene’s closeness to nature is used to justify an emphasis on the indigene as the land. In the one, nature becomes human, in the other human becomes nature. (Goldie 19)

Caubvick’s hair is described as “unusually coarse and glossy, almost like a horse’s mane . . . . It had seemed to spring not just from her skin but from her whole history and the lands that had made her” (20), placing it as a clear signifier for the wilderness, for a “savage” lack of constraint alien to

the Europeans due to their dependence on “civilization.” When Cartwright makes love with Caubvick in the Inuit camp, her hair is called “a denser darkness within the dark” (195), reiterating her placement as an Other, a standard marginalization for both women and colonial populations. Thus, at the outset, Caubvick’s hair is aligned with several aspects on the colonized side of JanMohamed’s manichean equation: black (dark), emotion, sensuality, and savagery.

However, when Cartwright takes the Inuit to England, Caubvick becomes enraptured by the very social sophistication which confounds Cartwright. Symbolically, Caubvick’s hair is tamed along with herself. She learns to prefer the artifice of “braids and ringlets” (211) to the dense mane of Labrador. At this point in the narrative a complex hybridity informs the otherwise conventionally binaristic presentation of the colonizer/colonized relationship, as revealed through the symbol of Caubvick’s hair. The ease and excitement of London society have converted Caubvick to the imperial point of view more completely than any force could: she wants to stay in England as much as Cartwright wants to return to Labrador. As do the two incidents of clothing being burned, Caubvick’s shift of allegiance to imperial society acts within the text as a photographic negative of Cartwright’s conversion to the liberation of the wilderness of Labrador. His authority is rooted in the philosophies and technologies which stemmed from the European enlightenment; hers is an authority of darkness, which cannot come to the light (i.e. be valued by the colonizers) as long as she continues to be assigned the role of Other by the self which is empire. And in order to justify colonization, according to JanMohamed, empire requires that indigenes such as Caubvick remain strictly Other (85).

But Steffler delineates a reciprocity between the characters of Cartwright and Caubvick which, once again, uses binary constructions even as it raises questions about their reductive ramifications. On one side of the Atlantic we encounter a landscape described by terms denoting disorder—“tangled” (Steffler 131) and “matted” (98, 131)—and a man who craves freedom from social constraints, while concurrently working to limit that freedom. Early in the text, Mrs. Selby tells Cartwright “[y]ou are more of a savage . . . than any of them” (10). However, as a representative of the Empire, Cartwright knows that his presence among the Inuit will change them. He accepts the “white man’s burden” without question, though Mrs. Selby has reservations about their civilizing agenda in the New World:

"They'll change, I think, slightly, with time." Cartwright said. "It's one of the things we have to offer them in exchange for their goods. Our knowledge, our habits, I mean."

"I wonder, though," Mrs. Selby said, "what use our habits will be to them, except to make the Eskimos more acceptable to us."

"To be civilized is worthy in itself." Cartwright spread his arms as though offering himself as an example. "It's the duty of the civilized man to elevate the savage." (127)

Cartwright's attitude toward the empire's dress codes has already shown that he is, at best, an ambivalent example of Western civilization, despite his aptness as a tool for furthering the exploitive imperial agenda in the colonies. However, his impulse towards a controlling domestication of the Other is evident in the application of textile terms to describe the Labrador landscape. For example, the untamed wilderness is juxtaposed to the weave of Cartwright's walking pants—" [e]very small leaf in the shadowless landscape shook with excessive clarity under his eyes. The weave in the cloth of his trousers was the same . . ." (181)—drawing attention to Cartwright's unconscious desire to order the "savage" landscape, even as he revels in the liberty he gains in its wildness.

On the other side of the Atlantic is a land which is "all made" (11), thoroughly domesticated, and a woman conceptualized as an avatar of the wilderness but who prefers to remain in the tamed space. Steffler's depiction of Caubvick includes a certain cultural naiveté: she does not realize that by privileging the material benefits offered by Empire, she continues the history of oppression, both of her gender and of non-white races. Though her situation is in many ways a negative image of that of Cartwright, her dark power supplies none of the authority which the technological and social trappings of "enlightenment" have given him. She begs to stay in England, but is compelled to return to Labrador. She repudiates all things from her former life, including her husband, but is not allowed to take on the role of wife to Cartwright (230). Mrs. Selby puts the final veto on Caubvick's desire to stay with them at the trading post in Labrador. When Cartwright wavers in his resolve to return her to her family, Mrs. Selby persuades him that she is "better off with *her people*" (240, italics in original), a logical extension of the Englishwoman's earlier argument that the Inuit should not be changed, but one which implicates the usually sympathetic woman with the patriarchal colonizing power. Even Mrs. Selby fails to deny the culture which formed her being, a transformation which JanMohamed deems necessary

for “genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness” (84). Thus, Caubvick is thwarted from choosing her own path: the representatives of Empire dictate her future according to the precepts of that Empire and not those of the people indigenous to Labrador.

But both these discontented characters yearn for hybrid cultures. Caubvick’s repudiation of her husband (230) indicates that she expects to maintain the social mores of Inuit culture while availing herself of the material advantages offered in England. Cartwright values the freedom of Labrador’s wilderness even as he works to limit that freedom in order to improve his position in England’s social hierarchy. Some ramifications of these split and hybrid desires emerge in the ways that Steffler integrates textile tropes into the smallpox epidemic among the Inuit aboard ship.

At the beginning of the journey back to Labrador, Caubvick is the first of the Inuit to contract smallpox, and the only one to survive it. These details provide a microcosmic allegory of the relationship between colonizer and colonized as presented by Steffler. Caubvick renounces her connection to the place which made her strong, and so that strength deserts her, leaving a conceptual weak point among the “natives” for an alien illness to enter. But she becomes enough of a “white man” to endure the illness of the white people: the rest of her relatives do not have that capacity. If Caubvick’s attraction to British culture changed her so that she could not die with her relatives, that change did not result in her having the strength to survive Empire’s illness without being disfigured in a manner which provides a metonym for the dis/enfranchisement of the Inuit.

Thus the trope of Caubvick’s hair becomes a cautionary tale: she gave up her natural strength and found herself without any strength at all. Hair has long been considered a seat of power in an individual: the Biblical Samson was fatally weakened by a haircut (Judges 16:17), and medieval court records show that women accused of witchcraft were shaved in order to deny them access to the power inherent in their locks (Reed). In her study of the trope of hair in Victorian literature (based on three myths or fairy tales representing paradigmatic uses of hair in Western literature) Elisabeth Gitter points out the identifying function of hair for the Other:

The crimes against [the heroines of these tales] all involve obliteration of identity: their attackers attempt not simply to murder or injure them but literally or symbolically to drown them, to destroy the innocent purity that is at the center of their being . . . . And the girls, physically or emotionally silent, achieve a miracu-

lous self-assertion and self-expression. Their marvelous hair, like Philomela's weaving, talks for them, proclaiming who they essentially are. (939)

Caubvick's "mane" is a variation on this conventional use of hair imagery. The ordering of her hair into braids and curls chokes its wild power into mere decoration: her physical being becomes a hybrid of the indigenous Other and the imperial self, an ambiguous situation ultimately more perilous than the mere clothing hybridity adopted by Cartwright and Selby. After the illness, her hair, that emblem of her land and history, looks and smells "like a dead animal" (238). She is forced into having it shaved off (239), an act symbolic of both Caubvick's loss of self-definition, and the loss of political autonomy, of power over their own lives, which the Inuit suffer under colonization.

In her book, *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag delineates the evolution of the metaphor of disease, commonly used to analogize social problems. She shows why such metaphors are misleading and, indeed, destructive: "Only in the most limited sense is any historical event or problem like an illness. . . . It [the disease metaphor] is invariably an encouragement to simplify what is complex and an invitation to self-righteousness, if not to fanaticism" (85). Steffler has avoided the kind of over-simplification which Sontag disdains, by choosing a metonym encompassing but not limited to disease. The destruction of Caubvick's hair through smallpox is believable both literally, and allegorically as the destruction of the Labrador landscape and of the Inuit. Furthermore, as an example of a "natural" textile, it relates to the imagery in the rest of the text in a complex way. The "cure" prescribed for smallpox is redness: red foods, and red clothing and surroundings. Thus the ruin of the natural textile trope, Caubvick's hair, occurs in an increasingly artificial environment, defined by the layers of red-dyed flannel in which the dying Inuit are tightly swaddled (Steffler 231, 233).

The use of manufactured cloth to bind the dying Inuit contrasts with Cartwright's illness-inspired experience upon returning to the army and accepting a post in the pestilential island of Minorca:

[t]he sounds of the regiment's routines drifted into his room, distant and echoing, boiling up with meaningless volume at times, then stretching into feeble strands. The life outside seemed conjectural, unreal. He sank and floated, passed through layer after layer of matter, soft textures rolled like bolts of cloth underneath him, coarse ones he fell through for hours like a gravelly sea. (95)

In this case, textiles are chosen for conceptual malleability, not actual restrictive properties, demonstrating how textile imagery can illustrate both

sides of a binary. More interestingly, both Cartwright and the Inuit are delirious when they suffer these textile-delineated experiences. However, the delirium of the perceived Other results in their being tightly bound, while the delirium of the military avatar of imperial selfhood is couched in phrases that indicate a lack of boundaries. Just as Bhabha cites the book as that which “turns delirium into the discourse of civic address” (106), so the cloth that binds the Inuit (for their own good) ensures their manageability even as they die. And just as Steffler uses textile terms to describe Cartwright’s delirium, so Bhabha’s example—Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—cites Marlowe’s story of the delirium of colonial Africa as a “yarn” (Conrad 65, 68; cited in Bhabha 107), the metaphorical name for a tall tale “spun” in the slow hours of mindless textile work like knitting or net-mending. In all of these examples, textiles are the metaphor deemed by the authors complex enough to delimit a non-logocentric experience.

Even before illness breaks out among the Inuit, Cartwright expresses regret for the attitudinal change in Caubvick, at the same time demonstrating his lack of understanding of the intricate intercultural alterations initiated by his presence among the Inuit. He explains that his “intention had been, after all, not to transform a few Eskimos into Englishmen, but to create a core of Eskimo allies and interpreters who could mediate on my behalf with their countrymen for the purpose of trade and exploration” (230). Cartwright’s attitude is reminiscent of the Church Missionary Society’s reasons for educating the “heathen” in India, elucidated in 1817. These Christians wanted to teach English to the Indians so that they “themselves might be made the instruments of pulling down their own religion” (correspondent of the Church Missionary Society, cited in Bhabha 106). Unlike this missionary, Cartwright never looks far enough beyond his immediate goals in order to speculate on the destructive implications that his presence as a representative of the empire will have on the Inuit. Ironically, the disease-ravaged, weakened, and discontented Caubvick is, in fact, an appropriate ambassador for empire, foreshadowing the effect that colonization will have on the indigenous populations of North America. In the book, her family is wiped out by disease. In the real world, those Inuit who survived the European illnesses found themselves in a veritable New World, one which rendered their traditional way of life impossible, through the enforcement of such abstracts as land ownership, fishing rights and other imperially-bestowed franchises. In this New World, laws developed for an

alien hierarchy assign the Inuit a position of perpetual servitude and resentful dissatisfaction.

**T**hus the cautionary tale of the destruction of the natural textile, Caubvick's hair, has ramifications far beyond the individual concern: not only is her identity abrogated in the hybridization of colonizer and colonized, but Caubvick herself becomes a sort of "Plague Mary" for the Inuit, bringing her pestilent locks back to the promised land, spreading the disease of the Empire in Labrador. Steffler characterizes the hair as lying "coiled in her trunk like a vicious animal" (257), bringing to mind the Western literary tradition of matching hair with snake imagery. The analysis of Medusa figures presented in Gitter's text further explains the ramifications of describing Caubvick's hair not only as coiled like a snake, but vicious as well: ". . . the snaky-haired alter egos of the silent, abused women function . . . as agents of vengeance" (Gitter 951). However, Caubvick's vengeance is not enacted on the colonizer but on the Inuit.

Cartwright refuses to allow Caubvick to move in with him and Mrs. Selby, the only trade that the Inuit woman will make for the severed hanks of her pestilent hair (239-40). His unwillingness to contravene the behavioural precepts of the Empire, neither "raising" the marginalized Caubvick to a social status equivalent to that of Mrs. Selby, nor killing her by throwing the hair into the ocean (21, 239), eventually results in the death of all of Caubvick's people of smallpox. Cartwright assumes that Caubvick's hair and not Caubvick herself caused the epidemic, and wonders "[d]id she take it out and put it on like a wig? Did she dance with it on? Wave it over their heads? He pictured it bobbing through the air like a torch trailing black fire and smoke" (257-8). This image from Cartwright's imagination has three important connotations: first, it provides a possible colonized parallel to the double-cross-dressing on the part of the colonizer. Just as Cartwright knows he was a soldier and chooses to lie to Attuiock, so Caubvick knows her hair is potentially dangerous to her people but, in Cartwright's imagined version of the scene, chooses to expose the Inuit to its influence. Neither fully understands the destructive implications of these facts: in both cases the victims are indigenes, not colonizers.

Secondly, the above passage confirms Gitter's observation that most retellings of the Medusa myth are not initiated by the victimized women but the men: ". . . the [female] revenger's tragedies . . . are enacted, from start to

finish, in the guilty men's imaginations" (Gitter 951). There is no "miraculous self-assertion and self-expression" (939) for Caubvick except through the doubly ephemeral imaginings of Cartwright's ghost:

It was a dream. It was only a dream that Caubvick confronted him, under water, in a blackish green light, her hair longer than ever, floating out from her colourless face, her grin already devouring him before they had touched. . . .

It was he who had condemned her to her watery jail. He had not just reduced her, made her pitiable, but had pushed her into another state, freed some monstrous power in her, that she now turned on him. (173)

This is the imaginary power that JanMohamed points out is consistently assigned by empire to the colonized Other in order to justify the oppression of a colonized population (84).

Thirdly, the description of Caubvick's hair as she dances with it—"trailing black fire and smoke" (258)—echoes its introduction as a metaphor for the industrial effluvia that Cartwright's ghost observes in the sky over England, the heart of the Empire (20). Caubvick's revenge is as complexly hybrid as her hair: her people die because they are shabby in comparison with London society; Cartwright is complicit in their deaths, because he did not force her to give up her hair; and the hair-like smoke in the sky over England indicates that even the imperial heartland is not immune to the devastating effects of colonial encroachment for the sake of trade and technology. Thus the trope of Caubvick's hair, far from representing only one half of a clearly defined, binary relationship, provides a metaphor complex enough to convey the interstitial ambiguities and ambivalences manifest in the power dynamic between colonizer and colonized.

However, that is not to say that the binaries thus problematized are thereby abrogated. Throughout the book, Steffler draws on literary conventions of metaphor in order to convey the story. These conventions do not question the cultural assumptions underlying many of JanMohamed's list of manichean oppositions: Caubvick's hair represents black (darkness), savagery (wilderness), emotions, sensuality, Other, object and female, while Cartwright stands for white (enlightenment), civilization (industrial technology), intelligence, rationality, self, subject, and male. As Bhabha does with the trope of the book, so Steffler uses the potentially non-binary character of textile metaphors to minutely explore the interface between oppositions. But the oppositions—though they may switch polarities, as Goldie suggests—remain intact throughout the exploration.



The last scene of *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* confirms this constructed polarity: when Cartwright's ghost is finally able to perceive Labrador, his spirit flies over the Eagle River, which is described as "passing beneath like a black silk scarf shot with white thread" (292). The image indicates that, despite being dead for almost two hundred years, Cartwright is still trying to perceive a technological order in the wilderness, trying to impose a logical revision on the imaginary. This impulse continues in the description of a bear which has "loose strings of water dangling from its fur" (293). But as he is eaten by the bear, giving up his organized identity to the avatar of wilderness, he notices an apparently inconsequential detail: "[s]mall ferns and mosses curly as hair . . ." (293). The simile has switched from the textiles of the Empire, produced by reason and technology, to the innate textile, hair. With this change Cartwright finally gives up the ghost, stops trying to fill the wilderness with reason. The bear's brush-like head is "painting him out, painting the river, the glittering trees in" (293).

**T**hroughout *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, Steffler has used textile tropes, first paradigmatically, to set up a traditionally manichean pattern of usage, and then contravening the carefully constructed paradigms in a way that invests those binaries with the appearance of ambiguity. Clothing delineates difference in a rigid-seeming cultural hierarchy. But examples of cultural cross-dressing in the text indicate that the outward symbol, the clothing, serves multiple masters. The hybrid garb of Cartwright in Labrador signifies his difference from the point of view of both the Inuit and the Europeans. When Caubvick tries to make the same change in the other direction—from dominated to dominant—the consequences are dire. This is shown in the dressing and destruction of her hair, a metonym for the exploitation of the Labradorian wilderness. In a colonial world where authority recognizes only its logocentric self, imaginary power—which is all that the imperial self will allot to the wilderness—becomes imaginary, negated.

Though their desire to straddle cultural boundaries—metonymized in their hybrid attire—aligns Cartwright and Caubvick, the difference in depictions of the two remains the difference between cloth and hair, made and grown, Empire and colony, positive and negative, light and dark, logos and imaginary. Steffler takes advantage of the highly complex signifying potential of textile tropes, but in doing so invests them with binary

referentiality. Unraveling the interwoven functions of textile tropes in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* reveals that Steffler's novel continues to project onto the perceived Other a positionality determined by the imperium long ago.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Dr. Gary Boire of Wilfrid Laurier University for his guidance in the development of this paper.

- 1 JanMohamed's theory of manichean opposition is itself rooted in the precepts of Edward Said's 1978 article "Orientalizing the Orient," in which Said explores the ramifications of the "us" and "them" mentality imbuing the relationship between the Occident and the Orient. "It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours'" (Said 54).
- 2 Initially, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* seems also to fall into the category of what Stephen Slemon calls Second World writing in his article "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World," which he characterizes as "the space of dynamic *relation* between those 'apparently antagonistic, static, aggressive, [and] dis-junctive' binaries which colonialism 'settles' upon a landscape: binaries such as colonizer and colonized, foreign and native, settler and indigene, home and away (Slemon 38, italics in original). Certainly the character of Cartwright is placed in just such a "space of dynamic *relation*" in Labrador. However, the continual comparison of Cartwright and Caubvick abrogates the potential Second World reading of Cartwright by forcing him into an alignment with empire in opposition to the colonized.

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