
Reviewed by Jordan B. Smith (Widener University)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

“Text” and “textile” mean very different things in modern parlance. A “text” usually denotes something written alphabetically with ink on paper. A textile is a piece of cloth. According to Danielle C. Skeehan, in her highly original The Fabric of Empire, this was not always the case. It is easy to forget that both words share the Latin root “textus,” meaning “thing woven” (p. 2). Over the long eighteenth century, makers and consumers alike could read both text and textile for narratives of production, political activism, resistance, and colonialism. It was through the synchronized processes of private property ownership and the creation of archives, Skeehan argues, that white, male-dominated printing gained preeminence over other forms of expression. As she examines the interstices of these categories, Skeehan suggests that “the origins of an American literary tradition may be woven rather than written” (p. 2).

The Fabric of Empire suggests an alternative definition of “literature” than that proposed by most literary scholars, but Skeehan is equally invested in expanding how her field defines “early America” or “the Atlantic world.” Virtually all of her citations are for books and pamphlets produced and circulated in Britain or the United States. Yet by examining metropolitan and colonial texts from England’s Atlantic empire alongside each other, Skeehan joins other scholars in describing a North Atlantic literary world. She diverges from many others in two key ways, though. First, she joins other scholars, including Jonathan Eacott (Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600-1830 [2016]), Alison Games (The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560-1660 [2008]), and Daniel Rood (The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean [2017]), in emphasizing connections between Britons and Americans in the North Atlantic and what she characterizes as the “Global South” (p. 14)—namely, Latin America, India, and China. Second, by emphasizing Indigenous and African-descended people as subjects, sources, and creators of material and literary cultures, Skeehan answers recent calls to decolonize American studies.[1]

Skeehan explores global and cross-cultural dimensions of textiles as literary products in six case studies. These case studies correspond with
three major epochs in the history of the Atlantic world: colonization, the age of revolutions, and American expansionism. The book is organized into three sections corresponding with those categories. In each chapter, Skeehan links texts to the fibers or fabrics that they describe, problematize, or sometimes even constitute.

The first section of the book considers how texts and textiles created racial expectations and divisions in Britain's burgeoning empire. Skeehan begins by examining the research conducted by an English woman named Virginia Ferrar on sericulture in early Virginia. Skeehan analyzes how Ferrar described the conjoined processes of naturalizing the silkworm to a new climate and adapting Indigenous laborers for the work. She notes how Ferrar sometimes wrote in the shape of a cocoon and drew parallels between literary and cloth work. In deploying these rhetorical strategies, Ferrar wrote English women like herself into the colonial project. Colonies became places where white women would manage the work of those that they classified as racially different than themselves. The second chapter further considers how India's preeminent textile industry shaped Atlantic colonization in the first three decades of the eighteenth century. Female British textile workers, and male writers like Daniel Defoe who supported them, protested these imports and suggested that white women needed protection from non-white producers. Britain redirected the textiles to the American colonies, helping to create the racial category of whiteness in the process. Clothing carried many meanings in the Black Atlantic, all of which helped to construct a “shared tactile language” (p. 88). I look forward to assigning this chapter to undergraduates considering the paired processes of alienation and cultural creation within the slave trade and Caribbean slavery.

In the third and final section of the book, Skeehan examines how textiles and textile makers shaped the United States’ colonizing projects in the early nineteenth century. Following American independence, American merchants flocked to China. Women—and especially schoolgirls—incorporated these distant lands into the public consciousness through samplers and silk globes. Skeehan suggests that this work supported American foreign policy in the era because needlework enabled women to participate in the process of “annexation” (p. 109). When America’s geopolitical priorities shifted to Latin America after 1823, the work of women repackaged Chinese geographies and culture for “passive consumption” (p. 112). In the final chapter, Skeehan analyzes a seventeenth-century account of Catalina/Antonio de Arauso, who escaped from a convent by fashioning men’s clothing out of their habit. Arauso eventually made their way to New Spain where they acted as a bookkeeper in textile shops. When this story reappeared in American newspapers in the nineteenth century, the United States had begun a process of annexing former Spanish colonies. Skeehan argues that accounts of Arauso refashioned Spanish colonial history—which in part entailed patriotism and feminine virtue. Chapter 4 brilliantly reads textiles as texts to reintegrate the Caribbean as a site of literary cultural production. Skeehan considers how Africans were often traded for cloth, stripped of their garments, and re-clothed in cheap English wares. Enslavers often commodified people through their clothing. Yet on Caribbean plantations, enslaved women sewing clothing, dying it with traditional dyes, or manufacturing it from products like lacebark claimed kinship, romantic affiliation, and personhood through their labors. Clothing carried many meanings in the Black Atlantic, all of which helped to construct a “shared tactile language” (p. 88). I look forward to assigning this chapter to undergraduates considering the paired processes of alienation and cultural creation within the slave trade and Caribbean slavery.
expropriating Indigenous labor in the textile industry—as part of American history. Arauso’s work thus aided in the expansion of the imagined community of the United States.

The Fabric of Empire imaginatively reconsiders how material culture and literary culture intersected and helped to constitute each other. The author is especially adept at unveiling the many women who took part in weaving text and textile together. Some of these women were elite writers or middle- and upper-class students. Many others included English wool workers, American housewives, enslaved seamstresses, and Indigenous textile workers. Skeehan’s adept analysis of the many people contributing to these texts and textiles invites further questions about how expanding who we think of as literary creators and consumers may require us to think differently about the definition and importance of literacy.

Scholars of early American literature, material culture studies, the history of work, and Atlantic studies will surely appreciate Skeehan’s original and nuanced analysis. Some may wonder, however, whether the book’s reliance on case studies—which I recognize literary scholars often employ—can sustain some of the broader conclusions that she draws. For instance, in chapter 2, Skeehan suggests a link between the calico debates and the concretization of racial categories in early eighteenth-century Virginia. This argument is incredibly thought provoking, but further consideration of how racialized slavery had already existed in English colonies for almost a century—and longer in other parts of North America and the Caribbean—might complicate the assertion that racial categories defining “the terms of New World bondage and freedom” emerged in this specific time and place (p. 49).

Likewise, Skeehan convincingly outlines the blurred edges of the British Atlantic world—which sometimes extended into Latin America, India, and China—but an episodic history makes it challenging to understand whether this expansiveness was the exception or the rule. There is also room to wonder whether the entangled literary cultures of the early modern world crossed imperial and linguistic barriers. Were France and the Netherlands (or their colonial subjects) part of the North Atlantic literary world studied here? Nonetheless, each of these critiques emerge from the book’s many strengths: The Fabric of Empire raises fascinating ideas that leave the reader wondering about their application to other moments and places.

Notes


Jordan Smith is an assistant professor of history at Widener University. He is at work on a book studying the emergence of rum as the quintessential Atlantic commodity in the seventeenth-and eighteenth-century Atlantic world.
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