

The Fabric of Empire: Material and Literary Cultures of the Global Atlantic, 1650–1850. By Danielle C. Skeehan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. xiii + 184 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Hardcover, \$54.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-3968-6.

doi:10.1017/S0007680521000805

Reviewed by Cynthia E. Chin

Danielle C. Skeehan's *The Fabric of Empire: Material and Literary Cultures of the Global Atlantic, 1650–1850* offers a material history of global modernity in the broadly defined Atlantic. The book seeks to expand our notions of text, in that “the origins of an American literary tradition may be woven rather than written” (p. 2). As a result, Skeehan presents a “material, labor-oriented history of the American book,” maintaining that textiles are, quite literally, texts (p. 14).

Ambitious in scope, this slim 173-page volume joins discussions of global material exchange in the Atlantic alongside *Building the British Atlantic World: Spaces, Places, and Material Culture, 1600–1850*, edited by Daniel Maudlin and Bernard L. Herman (2016); *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, edited by Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (2011); and Giorgio Reillo's *Cotton: The Fabric That Changed the World* (2015). The cover of Skeehan's book features an illustration by eighteenth-century Dutch naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, a promise of fascinating material connections between Merian's paintings and embroidery designs, the Dutch West India Company, and the natural world in Suriname that, unfortunately, go unexamined.

The book is organized into three parts. Part 1, “The Empire's New Clothes: British Public and Imperial Politics, 1650–1720,” engages the material and literary cultures of an elite British imperialism. It is followed by “Revolutionary Threads: New World Publics and Insurgent Economies, 1750–1800,” a material and literary history from the “perspective of colonials, colonized, and enslaved peoples at the periphery of the British Empire” (p. 10). The book concludes with part 3, “The Fabric of American Empire: Imagined Communities and New Geographies, 1600–1865,” which examines writing cultures, technologies, labor regimes, power, and racial and print capitalism within European colonization in the Americas.

With such an expansive premise and often unwieldy temporal scope, Skeehan's use of “American” and “Atlantic” as amorphous topographies are interspersed with the use of “republic” and “the United States.” While the book's introduction heralds new frameworks for understanding global exchange, American positionality, and the need to rethink “what we mean by America,” such frameworks—what Karin Wulf has coined

“vast early America”—have long been championed by scholars of inclusive, hemispheric histories, including Mary Sarah Bilder, Ned Blackhawk, Kathleen DuVall, Eliga Gould, Tiya Miles, Jean O’Brien, Stephanie Smallwood, Ian K. Steele, Brett Rushforth, Jace Weaver, and Rosemary Zagarri (p. 7).

This book joins present theoretical discourse with, and interpretive resistance to, the notion of texts-as-textiles yet does not deeply engage with existing scholarship. Though Skeehean points out that the words “textile” and “text” share linguistic, etymological origins and are often constructed from similar fibers, it is unclear how the chasm of intermediality is bridged without rootedness in established material culture methodologies that would address the challenges and boundaries of this assumption. In the introduction, Skeehean notes her intention to “invoke the methodologies that attend to material culture and material history” but does not identify, dialogue with, or resist established frameworks that privilege early American and global Atlantic ecosystems of objects, textiles, and their histories such as those by Richard Bushman, Carson Cary, James Deetz, Jonathan Eacott, Linda Eaton, Anne Gerritsen, David Jaffee, Catherine E. Kelly, Margaretta Lovell, Ann Smart Martin, Florence Montgomery, Jules Prown, John Styles, and Amanda Vickery (p. 4). The book does not include a full source list or bibliography.

Because of this methodological disembodiment, the work loses the powerful physical and narrative aspects of fabrics, paper, pulp, and threads and inevitably dematerializes them. As a result, readers may have difficulty with the governing premise that textiles, past a cursory association or metaphorical interpretation, are literature. A fully developed investigation of reading textiles as text when worn on the body also proves a significant omission. Additionally, readers with backgrounds in curation and visual and material culture may view some statements as hasty and potentially polemic, such as, “Textiles end up in museums and on display rather than ‘read’ as a means of telling history. If they have a story to tell, those stories are generally too opaque or speculative to constitute reliable evidence” (p. 14).

Despite the book’s timely acknowledgment of hemispheric America’s history of racial capitalism, its brief yet granular case studies are often without historical contextualization or fuller, more contemplative critical analysis. This eludes the stated intention of a more capacious reading of literary traditions. “Understanding the work of those who did not necessarily record their lives on paper” without also attempting to address their personhood has the potential to be read as complicit in their dehumanization (p. 14). The discussion of Afong Moy in chapter 5 perpetuates Moy’s commodification. Rather than attempting to

understand her life and the implications of exoticization and subjugation of a commercialized Asian woman in a white male power differential, Skeehean paints her as an immigrant and tokenizes her as an example of “the Orient as it was produced and imagined by American consumer and Chinese artists and designers” (p. 110). This section in particular fails to acknowledge how such early ethnic and gender prejudices and inequities shaped future racial bigotry, policies, and commercial practices in the United States. Similarly, and despite the intentions of its premise, the book’s centering of women like Virginia Ferrar and Susanna Rowson perpetuates the privileging of elite, white, highly educated American and British women as headlining narratives.

Overall, while the difficulty of textiles as books or written texts proves provocative and enticing, the book’s sweeping treatments present the necessary opportunity for further careful re-centering of diminished or once-known voices, participation with scholarship from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, and requisite mediation between “text” and “textile” through a more exhaustive methodological and historiographic participation and dialogue.

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Brewing a Boycott: How a Grassroots Coalition Fought Coors and Remade American Consumer Activism. *By Allyson P. Brantley*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 304 pp. Halftones, notes, bibliography, index. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6103-2.

doi:10.1017/S0007680521000970

Reviewed by Wendy Wiedenhoft Murphy

This detailed history of the decades-long boycott against Coors should give anyone pause when ordering their next beer, especially if it is a “Silver Bullet” or other Coors product. Integrating archival records from activists, mainstream and grassroots periodicals, and oral history interviews, Allyson Brantley offers an illuminating account of how boycotters organized a diverse coalition to fight the anti-union, discriminatory practices of Coors and its neoliberal ideology. Her narrative offers valuable lessons on how activists can mobilize supporters via the tactic of the boycott to fight corporate power. However, it also provides insights into strategies that corporate leaders can employ to contest and