

“A quaint house in the oldest quarter”:

Gendered Spaces of Empire in Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters*.

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<1>In 1858, *The Illustrated London News* in its January 16 edition offered a map of “The City of Delhi before the Siege,” displaying landmarks that were significant for military operations connected with the Mutiny, such as Cashmere Gate, the Pontoon Bridge, Moree Gate, Martello Towers, the English church, Skinner’s House, the Qutb Minar, and Customs House. The map, that looks southward, speaks to the old city of Shajehanbad, and is just one of many instances of efforts to spatially visualize the “lay of the land” for a Victorian public in the months and years that immediately followed the uprising. Black and white cartographical representations of the city found in periodicals like *The Illustrated London News* were also supplemented by photographic representations of Mutiny battle sites by celebrity photographers such as the Italian, Felice Beato, whose two years in India as a commercial photographer produced more than 130 topographical and architectural photographs, concentrated mainly upon the three mutiny sites of Cawnpore (Kanpur), Lucknow, and Delhi.⁽¹⁾

<2>Flora Annie Steel’s representation of this historical event in her mutiny novel *On the Face of the Waters*, has triggered considerable scholarly debate. For Benita Parry, Steel’s “insights of promise” in regard to the sepoy uprising “are lost in the morass of devilry and primitiveness which for her is the only source of Indian anger” (Parry 129); for Patrick Brantlinger, uncertain distinctions between narrative omniscience and free indirect discourse render Steel’s narrative voice ambiguous; feminist readings by Helen Pike Bauer, Jennifer L. Otsuki, Nancy Paxton, Rebecca Saunders, and Jenny Sharpe focus upon the memsahib’s search for agency, and David Wayne Thomas argues that Steel stages an intersubjective crisis between unshared British and Indian perspectives on empire. However, I would argue that race and gender as categories are explored through a plot that addresses a contest for space between feudal and modern imperial interests, centered upon Delhi, the capital city of the Moghul empire. Regardless of racial identities, women as a class must struggle with the spatial politics of empire, for empire

remains a patriarchal project, no matter what forms it may assume at different stages of history.

<3>Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* largely focuses on the Siege of Delhi, engendering both androcentric and gynocentric narratives of place, as the transformation of Moghul India into British India gets underway: the quintessentially male, conquest narrative, in which place is to be forcibly possessed, counterpointed against the predominantly female, fugitive narrative, in which place is to be sensitively navigated. A geo-centered reading of *On the Face of the Waters* reveals an uncannily reiterative set of spatial challenges to identities based on gender rather than race, thereby rendering imperial notions of "difference" problematic. Steel articulated her intent to interrogate race as a category in her Preface, where she stated: "I have tried to give a photograph that is a picture, in which differentiation caused by color is left out—of a time when neither the fair race or the dark one is ever likely to forget or forgive" (Preface vi). Such an *ekphrastic* moment, where a literary text forges relations with another art form, may seem ironic today, but a Victorian imperialist could effortlessly perceive how, unlike the artist's palette, the camera's mechanical reproduction of the image in black and white directed attention away from racial difference. By modeling literary realism on this new technology, Steel was able to blur racial distinctions in order to bring into focus those commonalities that characterized women's spatial relations with empire, regardless of race or religion. All of Steel's characters are profoundly impacted by space and place, belonging as they do to that historical moment when Lord Dalhousie pursued a robust policy of unification, annexing Indian princely states as part of a larger project of claiming India for nineteenth-century global capitalism. Equivalencies between imperialism and globalization have been well established in recent years by scholars of diverse political leanings, ranging from Niall Ferguson to Ray Kiely.⁽²⁾ More specifically, the intersection of the global with the local in British India under Company Raj corresponds with much recent theorizing on conditions of twenty-first century globalization by postmodern geographers such as Nigel Thrift, and Gibson Graham.⁽³⁾ Attentiveness to Steel's representations of space under Company Raj will demonstrate her novel's preoccupation with economic, political, and social systems in space-time as impacting the emplacement and displacement of gendered subjects.

<4>In a selective focus on urban gendered space in Steel's novel, this essay explores how a declining Moghul empire emerges as the antithesis and the mirror image of the colonial state in crisis, with women depicted as implicated, compromised, or intervening in the public sphere, till the uprising encourages a withdrawal into private space as a mode of recovering personal integrity. In the interplay between space, race, and gender, photographic moments punctuate Steel's narrative, scandalizing the binary of similarity versus difference, and interrogating the biases of an imperial gaze, so that, by the end of the novel, gendered space in British India must either be revalued or evacuated.

<5>For, if feudal and pre-capitalist societies in the nineteenth century resisted political and cultural forces aligned with global capitalism and modernity, it would still be fallacious to assume that the redrawing of a region's economic zones by the colonial state happily provided for female space as an autonomous sphere, produced or owned by women. Any discussion of female space must therefore be mindful of feminist geographer, Gillian Rose's admonition that, "to think about the geography of the female subject of feminism is not to be able to name a specific kind of spatiality which she would produce; rather it is to be vigilant about the *consequences* of different kinds of spatiality" (Rose 354). [Emphasis added] While female space is therefore engendered by a nexus of interests forged between patriarchy and the state, its utopist manifestations may be fitfully invoked, or improvised by women, in temporary forms under extenuating circumstances, even as the transformation of space into place occurs, as Doreen Massey notes, when the latter comes to be "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey 28). For both Massey and Rose, the production and construction of gendered space affirms a larger postulate shared by postmodern geographers, that space, far from being static, remains open to history.

<6>Steel's approach to the North Indian city as space and place alternates between an aerial, "monarch of all I survey" perspective, associated with imperial travel writing, and medieval urban mazes that the "lost" imperial subject must struggle to engage with, as part of dealing with Indian reality "on the ground."⁽⁴⁾ The action of the plot commences at Lucknow, the capital of the princely state of Oudh, under annexation by the British. Steel's topographical overview of Lucknow as "scattered yet coherent" space (4) mimics "objective" photographic representation, in order to capture its vexed contours:

On the opposite bank, its minarets showing fragile as cut paper against the sky, rose Chutter Munzil — the deposed King's favourite palace. Behind it, above the belt of trees dividing the high Residency gardens from the maze of houses and hovels still occupied by hangers-on of the late Court, the English flag drooped lazily in the calm floods of yellow light. For the rest were dense dark groves following the glistening curve of the river, and gardens gravely gay in pillars of white chum-baeli creeper and cypress, along prim lines of latticed walls and hedges of hibiscus. (3-4)

<7>Lucknow, as place, is where the natural and the social intersect. Western and Oriental horticulture compete for dominance over cultivated space, while the center of British power demarcates itself from the urban sprawl generated around an alternative center, the Chutter Manzil, a bastion of Muslim courtly culture, now in decline. While the fabled palace now looks a sham when placed against a skyline altered by the British Residency, a lazy British flag suggests the debilitating effects of oriental lethargy on British military muscle. The flag may function as

an index of local space overtaken by global capitalism, where the “most profligate town in India” has, “by one stroke of an English pen,” “been bidden to live ... in cleanly, courtless poverty” (4), but it remains, nonetheless, a supremely tentative signifier of territorial aggrandizement.

<8>In the auction of a bankrupt princely state’s assets, Steele locates the annexation of Oudh in 1856 within the broader imperial geography of the Occidental-Oriental binary, as a moment when “the commercial instincts of the West met the uncommercial ones of the East in open market for the first time” an encounter that “sharpened the antagonism of race... where the creed of one people is that Time is Money, of the other that Time is naught” (2). Steel represents North India as feudal or pre-capitalist space, subsumed into a global capitalist economy, while acknowledging that unequivocal historical confidence in a redrawing of borders might be premature. Hence, the formal irony of a narrative that commences with an assertion of closure in the auctioneer’s cry of “Going, Going Gone!” (1). As a “western phrase,” uttered “without a trace of doubt in its calm assumption of finality” (1), it loses rhetorical force as speech act when imported into a foreign location. *Memsahibs* Kate Erlton and Alice Gissing are both implicated in the liquidation of the Nawab’s estate. Both women witness the colonial state’s subsuming of the princely state into its borders, a spatial process that transpires through displays of purchasing power that utilize the good offices of British femininity in commodifying and secularizing a Muslim aristocracy’s cultural and religious assets. Hence the moulvie’s cockatoo, with its war cry of “Deen! Fateh Mohammed Deen!” (8) is debased as a fetishized object of exorbitant exchange value, when gifted to Alice Gissing as a token of adulterous passion by Major Erlton. The cockatoo will, in the course of the narrative, shuttle between British and Islamic space, a signifier whose functioning is contingent upon its *topos*. Kate Erlton vainly struggles to domesticate this symbol of Islamic militancy in her cantonment home, where its vicious nature renders it an unstable signifier of respectable femininity.

<9>For, in a world of contending empires, where global and local interests clash, domestic spaces are compromised. Kate Erlton, the neglected, a-sexual angel, and her rival, the flirtatious and promiscuous Mrs. Gissing, though immediately recognizable as opposing cultural stereotypes of Victorian femininity, share a common function in mediating transactions between a global and local economy. While drawn from different social spheres, the former, the wife of an army officer, and the latter, the wife of a businessman, military might and global capitalism form a nexus around both English women, for whom wifedom in the colonies carries its share of official duties. If India is a space of competition and corruption, then its domestic spaces are equally tainted by the role accorded to the memsahib as mediatrix between pre-capitalist and capitalist economies. Alice Gissing’s husband, as business man, is a brazen apologist for global capitalism, despite its culture of corruption. Mrs. Gissing, unlike Kate Erlton, does not seek to replicate English domesticity in India, replete with English flower gardens, but,

given Mr. Gissing's monopoly for supplying beer to the British army, her home is appropriately furnished after the "nabob-and-pagoda-tree style"(52). Mr. Gissing, who possesses a "knack of piling up rupees, which made the minor native contractors, whose trade he was gradually absorbing gnash their teeth" (53), is a new phenomenon to India's business castes in 1856, who seek to gain his patronage by offering his wife "fruits and sweets, with something costlier hidden in the oranges and sugar drops"(53). Domesticity's "sweet order," to use Ruskin's phrase, deteriorates into improvised transactional space, crucial for the functioning of an imperial economy, since Alice Gissing, we are told, "accepted everything with a smile" (53). At her luncheon party, conversation addresses native misperceptions of Mr. Gissing as a member of officialdom, given native complaints that the Government robbed them both ways, by demanding personal bribery, as well as official graft for contracts bestowed. The failure of Indian business-men to distinguish between a Government contractor and a Government servant is both naïve and astute, for the economic and political spaces of empire are coextensive and mutually committed to expansionist agendas. Gissing offers his defense of corruption as a process of modernization that will introduce Indians to global markets and competition:

"...an Englishman is bound to rob a native if that means creaming the market, for they haven't been educated sir, on those sound commercial principles which have made England the first nation in the world...I'm beer by rights of course. But why shouldn't I have my finger in any other pie which holds money? These hereditary fools think I shouldn't... They ignored the facility of transport given by roads etc. They ignored the right of the Government to benefit — er — slightly — by these outlays...If they're to face Western nations they must learn — er — the morality of speculation." (54)

If Gissing is euphemistic, it is because he may only tacitly acknowledge that a market economy promoted and protected by a colonial state, safeguards the interests of British business, rather than its native subjects.

<10>If Alice Gissing presides over dining table banter regarding business ethics, her entertaining shares much in common with Kate Erlton's Christmas celebrations in Delhi. Kate Erlton's Indian Christmas has for its center piece a spruce fir for a Christmas Tree, for, as noted, the "Tree in itself was new to India in those days" (115). As a progressive move towards relaxing racial boundaries, it is Kate Erlton's hope that the tree as transplant will function as an organizing center for her newly imagined, racially inclusive British India, since her innovation has been inviting "all children of parents employed in Government offices or workshops...not only those with pretensions to white faces"(115). However, if claims of racial difference are already established as bogus to some degree, given the long-standing practice of miscegenation, so too is the domestic character of a Victorian Christmas. The verandah is

strewn with lavish offerings of edibles from “contractors, agents, troopers and dealers” to the Major, who “might have a voice in much future patronage” (114). The Victorian family Christmas is recast as belonging to the public sphere. The “business” of empire encroaches upon the liminal spaces of a cantonment verandah, with distinctions between gift-giving and bribery blurred, thanks to the domestic camouflage afforded by the presiding genius of the English memsahib.

<11>Porous borders, however, are problematic, for invasion is never an unequivocal subsuming of local space into global space. Western capitalism may extend itself into traditional Indian space through manifold forms and guises, but, when self-consciously imitated by native entrepreneurs, it becomes a dramatized indictment of Company Raj. So the pseudonymous Jhungi and Bhungi masquerade as avatars of the East India Company’s original contractors for grain supply. Their audacious charter is a brazen flaunting of their assimilation into the world of Western capitalism, where criminality and prosperity go hand in hand: “While Jhungi and Bhungi’s oxen/Carry the army’s corn, /House-thatch to feed their flock on, / House-water ready drawn. /Three murders daily shriven, / These rights to them are given, /While Jhungi and Bhungi’s oxen/ Carry the army’s corn” (50). Hence, their malicious mockery of the English in cast-off Western garb at an Indian fair, in a spectacle of folk theater intended exclusively for Indian eyes. Alice Gissing, the memsahib who has strayed into rural space, is panic-stricken at the sight of such cultural mimicry that renders Englishness incongruous with a local landscape. There are spaces in rural India beyond the purview of British administrative and economic authority, even as there are rogue elements that render feudal and imperial spaces contiguous and unstable, given their improvised loyalties and multiple allegiances to old and new orders. This accounts for the allegorical logic of the “virtuous” Jhungi rendered indistinguishable from his business partner, the scoundrel Bhungi, who invariably manages to elude the long arm of the law.

<12>Jenny Sharpe notes the unruly subaltern element in the novel that resists British policing, but, the pair are, by virtue of their mobility, this and much more.⁽⁵⁾ They possess the same dangerous vagrancy and liminality that the British once identified with the practice of *thuggee*. However, such liminality also accounts for the affinity they seem to naturally share with James Douglas, who answers to the allegorical alias of “Greyman.” The two Bunjaras are members of a caste of grain carriers, with a hereditary monopoly for transportation of grain to the British army since “time immemorial” (50), but they have also been employed by the levies of the erstwhile princely state of Oudh, hired by British outcast and agent, James Douglas, to work in his stables, and at the time of the plot’s commencement, are discontentedly “subcontracting under a rich Hindoo firm which was dealing direct with the Department”(50). Presumably, their dissatisfaction arises from no longer being recipients of the spoils and pickings available from Government patronage; hence, their motivation for generating rumors of bones in

Commissariat sacks of flour as competitive business practice. Jim Douglas's astute recognition of the danger they pose, stems from his awareness that they are far from what a British civilian believes to be "a strong, contented commercial class, with a real stake in the country" (50). Douglas warns of growing embellishments to such rival sales propaganda in every village Jhungi's caravan visits. Nevertheless, Douglas, like the Bunjaras, is also a vagrant spirit, who cannot be effectively "placed." His liminality as "Greyman" the outcast British agent, dishonorably discharged from the army because of a romantic scandal, permits for the same kind of dubious commerce with natives, resulting in illicit purchases of contraband, be it a child prostitute from sex-traffickers, or lessons in the nefarious arts of disguise and trickery from Tidoo and the rest of the Bunjara tribe. But, by gaining apprenticeship with the Bunjara theater group, Douglas, as an agent of the imperial underground, also audaciously posits that racial identity may be largely performative.

<13>Unlike the stylized spectacle watched by Alice Gissing, representation in the "Christmas" Bunjara play is a visual experience that initially resembles the photographic negative, depending only upon a "strange dim curtain with its indefinable lights and shadows" (125). A discomfiting Hindu morality play displaces forms of English theater more conventionally suited to the occasion, such as the Christmas pantomime, or the Nativity pageant. Business corruption and domestic strife are now subject to the Hindu judgment of Indra, the Lord of Life, and Yama, the God of Death, roles performed, ironically, by Douglas himself. As native performer and imperial spy, a racially indeterminate Douglas, as double agent, accomplishes Hinduism's spatial and psychic invasion of the memsahib's world and consciousness, for Kate Erlton strains to discern the shadow that is India, along with its esoteric moral ethos, in the flickering images that play upon the screen. In doing so, she speculates, while waiting "dreamily for the Lord of Life or the Lord of Death" that "the difference only lay in the way you looked at life" (127). In the crisis that follows the uprising, Douglas will stand revealed to Kate as the paradoxical incarnation of those oppositional and complementary forces that compel a reappraisal of her position as conflicted memsahib.

<14>If, on the eve of the uprising, boundaries between British India's public and private spheres are as blurred as the borders between native space and a global imperial economy, then Company Raj finds its mirror image and opposite in the spatial politics engendered by the Moghul empire, and its rival claims for territorial supremacy. Steel's representation of Delhi's topography focuses upon the one corner of the old city "where the English flag did not float" (84). As an imperial space, the Moghul palace, a fortress that hemmed in "a few acres of earth from the march of Time" (84) is anachronistic, and, viewed through the lens of Darwinian metaphor, irreversibly in devolution, a "tepid, teeming breeding place for strange forms of life unknown to purer, cleaner atmospheres" (84). For this empire, all historical possibility has ceased, its deeds no more than the subject of a court gazette, produced by an elderly scribe at

the gate, whose “polished Persian polysyllables” articulate a string of empty honorifics attached to the Moghul Emperor, including the title “Defender of the Faith” that Bahadur Shah, ironically shares with Queen Victoria (86). Negotiations between Moghul and British empires are described as an encounter between two contending spheres named “the Survival” and “Civilization” (85).

<15> Women of the declining Moghul empire, like their English counterparts, are also caught up in spatial politics generated by the public sphere. So Zeenut Maihl, ensconced in the feminine space of the *zenana*, meddles with affairs of state as ambitious queen, in the interest of her son, through the evil offices of her sinister cleric, Hussan Askurias. In her corruption she is akin to Kate Erlton attempting bribery in the sacred name of motherhood, so that her son will not suffer the ignominy of a disgraced name. But, if women are to survive, they must maneuver with the spatial realities of empire. Instead of conventional and compromised domestic spaces such as cantonment residences and royal zenanas, they must search for unorthodox spaces, epitomized in the “quaint house” (27) lost within the urban maze of Lucknow, where James Douglas’s multi-ethnic household consisting of a Muslim *bibi*, a Christian *sahib* and a Hindu *ayah* live in obscure community. Although this doomed community in Lucknow vanishes early in the narrative, with the death of Zora, the Muslim mistress, its repeated avatars will find improvised manifestations in Delhi, as female space, where brief moments of sorority will permit for survival in the face of the terrible ordeal of the siege.

<16> Kate Erlton seeks an alternative locus, forsaking the endangered military cantonment for a residence in Delhi’s Mufti Alley. Her fugitive status is already prefigured in the flight of the young royal widow, Newasi, to the very same neighborhood, away from the intrigue of a Moghul court that plots against her life. The Mufti Alley is a space of potential Muslim modernity, south of the Jumma Masjid, where “a score or two of the Mohammedan families connected with the chief magistrate of the city lived, decently, respectably, respectedly” (101) locking the alley’s gates at times against the “wicked world” (101) with “tall, windowless buildings...standing sentinel blindly over the naughtiness” (101). Respectability establishes equivalence between the Mufti Alley residents and the Victorian middle-classes. The Mufti Alley may partake of the maze of confusion that characterizes a besieged bastion of feudalism, but it is also a retreat, and a site of resistance for an educated citizenry, who are conscious of imperial decadence. Hence, while studiously turning a blind eye to the nefarious practices of a corrupt court, its inhabitants throw up their hands “in horror over the doings of the survival—and despite race and religion—an inevitably reluctant yet inevitably firm adherence was given to civilisation” (101). Newasi’s choice of the Mufti Alley is an act of personal reorientation, borne of her recognition that the Moghul court no longer operates as center to an Islamic empire, but subsists on the periphery of a modern world. In doing so, she expresses an affinity with a newly emerging, globally-conscious, Muslim middle class. Newasi’s position is shared by other literate

women of the alley, who are intrigued by Queen Victoria as female sovereign, while enjoying an elevated perspective from urban roof tops, in contrast to the limited perspectives afforded by the lattice bound spaces of a royal *zenana*.

Even the womenfolk on the high roofs knew something of the mysterious woman across the sea, who reigned over the Huzoors and made them pitiful to women, and Farkhoonda Zamani read the London news with great interest, in the newspaper Abool-Bukr used to bring her regularly. Hers was the highest roof of all...(101)

However, Newasi, like Erlton, remains relatively immobile in her seclusion.

<17>Female mobility is reserved for the crippled harem scribe, Mussamat Hafzan, who, as skeptical pragmatist, and acerbic critic, is also the female counterpart of James Douglas. Unsexed by disability, Hafzan, like “Greyman,” operates as medieval spy and modern reporter. We first encounter her in a Pathan veil, a heavier form of *burqa*, donned by women of the North West Frontier province, returning from her rounds, to report to her mistress, Zeenut Maihl, the Queen. It is Hafzan’s token “genderless” status as “white chrysalis” (87) and “formless figure” (88) that allows her to gaze upon masculine worlds forbidden to women. Unveiled, Hafzan appears enfeebled, “more shrunken than ill-formed” (93). Behind her veil, she acquires the power of private space, for unlike the graceful Zora, languishing as love object in confinement, Hafzan’s mobility permits for voice, and self-possession. However, vitriol may be another cloak for the invisible lives of women, for, as her uncle apologetically explains to the moulvie: “She hath been mad at men even since hers, being old and near his end took her, a child...” (279). Hafzan’s history of child abuse blurs distinctions between the child bride and the juvenile courtesan, for both must submit to enforced residence within the patriarchal household.

<18>Hafzan’s surveying of Delhi from the vantage point of the Zafar Mahal is a rare moment where the female gaze encompasses vistas that articulate visions cherished by a succession of Turkic dynasties, for constructing India as Islamic imperial space. Her meditative position on the low parapet of the palace fort affords a variety of vantage points on India as Moghul Empire, and reads like a photographic essay. The wide plains and Yamuna River along the eastern fortification appear peaceful if inscrutable, but, because of an architectural feat that raises the level of the grounds within to the top of the wall, the perspective from the opposite side of the stream is of domes and colonnades that “cut clear upon the sky, like a castle in the air” while at sunset “they show in shades of pale lilac, the huge dome of the great mosque bulging like a big bubble into the golden light behind them, as a veritable Palace of Dreams” (89). Under Hafzan’s gaze, the splendor of empires turns phantasmal, as all that is solid threatens to melt into air. Each roseate wall exudes beauty and strength, yet the overhanging structures of the Queen’s summerhouse, the Private Hall of Audience, and the king’s balcony, suggest a

precarious imperial poise. From Hafzan's perspective, Moghul imperial spaces such as the Zafar Mahal breed both fantasy and fear, its gardens, embellished domes, and colonnades as paradisaical world offset by menacing structures like the public hall, a building "with a remorseless look in its plain expanse of dull red stone, pierced by toothed arches which yawned darkly into a redder gloom, like monstrous mouths agape for victims" (88). To be lured into such spaces is to risk being devoured and destroyed by a deceptive grandeur.

<19>Even more laden with symbolism is Hafzan's registering of the view engendered from the King's balcony that looks beyond a barren landscape of rocky hillocks, to the phallic structure of the Qutb Minar, in the distance, raised by Qutbu'ddin Aibak, who established the first Turkic dynasty in Delhi, in 1206. In what seems an approximation of free indirect discourse, the narrative voice articulates Hafzan's musings on the landmark minaret as "that symbol of the undying dream of Mohammedan supremacy that never came, that can never come to pass" (89). To the female gaze, masculine visions of imperial space are humbled by time. Indeed, Hafzan's vision is reiterated by Charles Morecombe, in the elegiac, epistolary conclusion Steel offers readers through his letter to Kate Erlton: "Truly the whole thing was a mystery from beginning to end...You can see that by looking into the cemeteries. India is a dead level for the present; all the heads that towered above their fellows are laid low. Think of them all! Havelock, Lawrence, Outram – the names crowd to one's lips; but they seem to begin and end with one—Nicholson!" (475). The imperial theme and the elegiac mode seem inescapably intertwined.

<20>Hafzan's sibylline persona emerges from her resistant readings of Moghul space. Reacting to its anachronistic grandiosity, she preaches an anarchic feminism that rejects feudal obligations of service to sovereign or state. In response to inquiries pertaining to Queen Zeenat Maihl, her mistress, she retorts: "My mistress! Nay, sahib! Hafzan is that to herself only. I am for no one save myself." (87-8). As interpretive intermediary between the "Survival" and "Civilisation," she challenges a Moghul leadership confined within the social and intellectual parameters of the imperium, demystifying signs taken for wonders, such as the green-feathered cockatoo, or the prophetic dreams of the Queen's cleric. As modern, secular consciousness, she recognizes delusional dreams for a renascent Moghul empire whose hour has passed. As religious skeptic observing a hapless Eurasian mother with children, she predicts British reprisals to the moulvie, blasphemously asserting that "God is on their side" (278). And, from Hafzan comes the first articulation of the need for female space in an expression of solidarity that rejects men's claims on women's loyalties as racial kindred: "...God save all women, black or white, say !! Save them from men, and since we be all bound to Hell together by virtue of our sex, then will it be a better place than Paradise by having fewer men in it" (279). The novel's gynocentric narrative of place explores this radical option.

<21>The separation of women's space from the public sphere commences with the angel's detachment from cantonment society. Kate's fugitive narrative initiates a trajectory of progressive immurement that paradoxically expands imperial consciousness to recognize likeness in alterity, configured in Zora, the dead courtesan, Tara the Hindu suttee, and Newasi, the Moghul princess. Danielle Nielsen sees Kate's confinement as a process of inculturation. But the description Steel lavishes upon what is clearly demarcated as female space also serves to establish parallels between the lives of the women who occupy these spaces, thereby accomplishing Steel's agenda of interrogating racial difference. By contrast, the public masculine world engenders tunnel vision. So, Kate's husband, grieving for Alice Gissing, suffers an obsessive preoccupation with Delhi, while contemplating the panoramic beauty of the eastern plains. (6) Major Erlton "only saw the city. That, to him was India. That filled his eye. The wide plains east and west, north and south—where the recent rain had driven every thought save one of a harvest to come from the minds of millions—where the master meant simply the claimer of revenue—might have been nonexistent so far as he, and his like, were concerned" (327). The male gaze of the imperial soldier misses the photographic moment, failing to perceive the geography of a vast countryside governed by seasonal cycles and administrative routine, remote from the military and political power struggles of rulers and governments. Such a gaze could not have, for this reason, apprehended an alternative geographical consciousness formulating in rural India through the exchange of chuppatties from village to village accompanied by the cryptic message: "From the South to the North. From the East to the West" (132). If Erlton's aerial overview fails to achieve visual dominance, Kate, his wife, who gains entry into the maze as fugitive, learns of India by occupying spaces of Indian femininity, where, through enclosure, she encounters similarity, rather than difference.

<22>As part of her transformative process, Kate enters three enclosed spaces: she exits the first two in fear of her life, while her exit from the third takes place under a benedictory injunction from its leader, a Hindu sage, to "go in peace and have no fear" (413). Her entry into the first enclosure blurs distinctions between Christian wife and Indian courtesan, as she is compelled to occupy the bibi's establishment, the space of the native mistress, submitting to skin dye and symbolic bondage in the amulet Douglas clasps onto her arm, as "gold fetter" (285), while masquerading initially as Douglas's English spouse in a space she struggles to resignify, through her use of cultural objects, such as chessboards, and a book or two.

<23>Such racial indeterminacy, voluntarily embraced, renders difference problematic. Douglas, presented with the approximation of a family tableau while watching skin-stained fugitives Kate Erlton and Sonny Seymour interact together, struggles to read a "pretty picture" (357) where, in the words of Steel's Preface, "color is left out." Andrea Kaston Tange has noted how illustrated representations of beleaguered English maternity under attack by sepoys, circulated in the Victorian press for propagandist purposes. Steel may well have sought to ironize such

iconic “mutiny” images, with this problematic portrait of memsahib and *chota* sahib. In a photographic moment suffused with a sense of the uncanny, Douglas is struck by the resemblance Kate and Sonny bear to his dead mistress and still-born Eurasian son. Wrestling with the incomprehensible surge of contentment he feels, Douglas remorsefully ponders the possibility that the imagined white skin beneath the stained complexion of the English boy permits for a release of paternal affection suppressed at the sight of his mixed-race offspring. His musings on similarity and difference resonate to discourses on race in Victorian India as propounded by John Lubbock, George Campbell, W.W. Hunter, and Henry Maine, especially the last mentioned, whose formula “from status to contract” addressed the possibility of ethnicities trapped in environmental stasis entering an evolutionary stage of manly action.⁽⁷⁾ As color is rendered problematic, “Greyman” wavers in doubt over the conundrum posed by hybridity, its sympathetic promise of likeness and manly development that renders prejudice superfluous: “Would that dead baby have grown into Sonny? Or was it because Sonny’s skin was really white beneath the stain that he thought of him as something to be proud of possessing; of a boy who would go to school and be fagged and flogged and inherit familiar virtues and vices instead of strange ones?” (357). Familial sentiment seems founded upon a sense of affinity, both wholly real and wholly perceived, shaped by biases that warp the imperialist’s gaze. Hence, his perplexity on “the mystery of fatherhood and motherhood, which had nothing to do with that pure idyll of romantic passion on the terraced roof at Lucknow, yet which seemed to touch him here, where there was not even love” (357). English domesticity resituated in Indian space compels Douglas to confront the emotional confusion that racial indeterminacy generates within his own racially and ethically conflicted sensibility as mobile “Greyman.”

<24>On the one hand, such indeterminacy hints at negating all dualistic differentiation between self and other, thereby affirming a Oneness of Being, provoking Douglas into meditating on “the word ‘Om’—the final mystery of all things” (357). But the phenomenal confusion “Greyman” suffers also dramatizes a process of transition that the uprising has effected in the English sensibility, with the upsurge of generic devotion towards womenfolk and children regarded as racial kindred. As opposed to Hafzan’s feminist separatism, Greyman finds himself reintegrated into imperial patriarchy thanks to the “mutiny,” as preoccupations with racial honor displace orientalist passions. The Siege of Delhi might last three months, but its victorious outcome for the British is predicated on the colonization of Indian space accomplished by the asexual angel’s transforming of the *bibi’s* zenanainto an English home for the nomadic colonial adventurer. Kate’s estimation, that “the roof became a very fair imitation of home” (347) is a view conceded by suttee survivor, Tara, who might have qualified for the role of marriageable heroine in an imperial romance, a half-century earlier:

Zora Begum had never played shatrinj [chess] with the master, had never read with him from books, had never treated him as an equal. And, strangely enough, the familiar

companionship — inevitable under the circumstances — roused her jealousy more than the love-making on that other terraced roof had done. That she understood. But this — this which to her very real devotion seemed so utterly desirable — what did it mean? (347)

Kate's position here parallels the ambiguous status of Englishwomen confined to Cawnpore's House of the Ladies that Hyungji Park has addressed. But Kate's reputation remains unsullied through education, rather than sexual virtue.

<25>Kate's second cloistered experience as fugitive in the house of Newasi, into which she stumbles while fleeing assassins, also requires the intervention of an Indian woman, while elaborating on the instinctive sense of bonding education forges between females, across boundaries of class and race. Kate's first furtive glimpse of Newasi, absorbed in the Koran, parallels Tara's valorizing gaze bestowed upon the reading memsahib. Like Kate, Newasi's serene literacy renders her relations with the cavalier Moghul prince, Abool Bukr, chaste. In Newasi, Kate therefore comes face to face with a double, for "they seemed strangely alike...not in feature, but in type; in the soul which looked out of the soft dark and the clear grey eyes" (378). Hence, regardless of racial variations in appearance, Kate solicits refuge from the princess in the name of womanhood: "I am a Christian—but a woman like yourself" (378). Parallels between their fates develop, for both women lose their men to the siege. In the retaking of the city, Major Erlton is killed in action, while Abool Bukr is gunned down with other princes by Major Hodson.

<26>Kate's third incarceration, this time as potential suttee, takes place in a *shivala'* room that quite literally bears the impress of Tara's hand. It is a space shaped and inscribed by woman, for Tara has daubed the room's mud walls and floors, and in a singular act of mantric literacy, traced the sacred invocation of "Ram-Ram-Sita-Ram," while imprinting the signature of her palm in bloody red over each chaplet-decked doorway, in imitation of a suttee shrine. Female Hindu space effectively isolates the memsahib as Hindu penitent from the public sphere. Kate must endure this retreat into Hindu interiority, if she is to learn the meaning of happiness, which is also the meaning of Sri Anunda's name. She now meditates facing a garden wall, all visibility of an exterior world, or public sphere, completely denied, in order to fully realize the shadowy truth of Life and Death as One, first glimpsed on that fateful Christmas Day. The gift of a henna branch from the androgynous looking Sri Anunda accompanies his words: "The lesson is learn't sister...Go in peace and have no fear" (413). As token, the flowers will accompany her back into Metcalfe House, the talismanic sign of the memsahib's embrace of non-dualistic Hindu epistemology, for Kate recognizes the blossom's paradoxical association with life and death, since "bridal hands had been stained with henna, and corpses embalmed with it for ages" (413). The experience of the siege has revealed to Kate the possibilities that death offers

for renewal, a gospel not incompatible with Christmas, since the appearance of Sri Anunda puts her in mind of Raphael's San-Sistine Bambino.

<27>Post-Mutiny India compels a reevaluation of woman's place, and if the penitent memsahib is restored to authentic domestic space in Britain, the figure of Tara addresses the question of female displacement, for Tara's full complexity goes unrecognized if she is not read in relation to her complicated relations with space. As forcibly rescued suttee, Tara is the epitome of inauspicious mobility. As social outcast, she is absorbed into the discreet, if opprobrium-ridden Anglo-Indian domestic space of the *bibi ghar*, attending on its inmates, the Muslim, Zora, and the Englishwoman, Kate. As proud Rajput, she repeatedly seeks escape into the maze, joining an underground Durga cult that locates psychic and spiritual integrity in Hindu femininity, the better to function as a nucleus of resistance against British cultural hegemony. As displaced woman, Tara must oscillate between servitude and rebellion, and, by extension, between life and death. After her first release from service following Zora's death, Douglas comes across her in the streets, semi-clothed, head shaven, parading in exhibitionist fashion the scars that semiotically animate her body as a site of contention between what Freud would have defined as *eros* or sexuality as life instinct, and *thanatos*, or the death drive. In Tara, Douglas encounters a delinquent subjectivity that affirms identity through self-negation, articulated through her cry of "I am suttee!" (79), and asserted through a defiant mobility that Douglas seeks to restrain.

<28>As vagrant body, she metamorphoses into guide and protector. Her strategic interventions conduct Kate through the urban maze, from Mufti Alley, to *shivala*, to Metcalfe House, to Jim Douglas's sick bed, for Tara's agency is the product of an insightful, androgynous spatial intelligence, that Kate in her fugitive condition, and Jim Douglas in his illness, both forfeit. Donning her twin brother Soma's military uniform after physically overwhelming him in a struggle, she escorts Kate safely from Hindu ashram to Christian cemetery, and on to Metcalfe House, informing Kate of the metaphysical import of transcending gender: "Soma or Tara it matters not...They were one at the beginning" (416). Androgyny is a condition deified in Hindu mythology in the hermaphroditic figure of Ardhanarisvara, the blending of the god Shiva with his consort Parvati.⁽⁸⁾ In Tara the androcentric conquest narrative and the gynocentric fugitive narrative coalesce. And, as *deus ex machina*, or god from the machine, she becomes the embodiment of those mysterious and fateful forces Steel associates with the uprising, determining the spaces of Muslim *bibi* and Hindu *suttee* to be unsuitable for Kate, and returning her to Douglas's side, where, as memsahib, she may resume her rightful role as ministering angel and Christian wife.

<29>Tara's suicide is a courageous recognition of her own displacement, for she and Douglas are in agreement that a belated immolation cannot qualify as suttee: "You know as well as I

that it is too late for any good to you or others. The Fire or Water should have come twelve years ago" (77). When she therefore plucks her lock of hair from Douglas's locket, placed there by him to discourage her suicidal tendencies, she is motivated not so much by deranged jealousy as by a logical sense of her own redundancy "hers, *if she could have nothing else*; for she was suttee—suttee!" (466). [Emphasis added] The *shivala* into which she retreats is a literal and historical *cul de sac*.

<30>It is left to the educated and celibate Newasi to dedicate herself to the production of female space. British officer, Charles Morecombe, in his letter to Kate Erlton, addresses the fate of pensioned Moghul royalty: "I expect precious little hard cash gets to some of the wretched women. One of them, no less a person than the princess Farkhoonda Zamani — that beast Abool-Bukr's ally — has set up a girls' school. If she had only befriended you instead of turning you out, she would have done better for herself" (475). In an act of formal irony, Steel accords a male narrator the last word, but Morecombe's androcentric account of the Mutiny suffers from gaps that only the female reader may fill. Kate's female fugitive narrative, made possible by the availability of female space and the agency of Indian women, goes unwritten, for she has been restored to conventional domesticity with a rehabilitated Douglas. Newasi's girls' school as potential female space may ultimately be co-opted into the modern space that is British India, but the new geography is not wholly valorized. India is disciplined and reconstructed as place by imperial administrators, whose calcified official discourse becomes part of empire's efforts at managing recalcitrant space, evidenced in the memorandum dispatched by the allegorically named A. Dashe, Collector and Magistrate of Kiyalpore to the ironically named R. Tape, Commissioner and Superintendent of Kwalabad. Administrative geography remaps India into districts, with units pertaining to Public Works, Law, Police, and Public Health. India, divested of feudal grandeur, is claimed by an imperial economy that serves British interests.

<31>To read Flora Annie Steel's novel geo-politically is to uncover a narrative that traces intriguing parallels between women of varying racial and religious identities, who struggle to find a space of their own. Steel's richly varied portraits of Indian femininity emerge in relation to the memsahib figure, participating in a critique of empire made manifest in a title that, as Christian reformulation of Indian peasant responses to the uprising, operates as a temporal and spatial metaphor. While it may view the "mutiny" as shaped by inexplicable and incoherent forces, it also re-envisages imperial terra firma as primordial waters or amorphous, mutating space. Androcentric narratives of conquest prove therefore to be a geographical delusion. Female efforts at discovering "a quaint house in the oldest quarter" may be the sanest recourse, in the face of imperial ambitions, even if such spaces inevitably remain unwritten and invisible to official historians of the 1857 uprising.

Endnotes

- (1) See for instance David Harris's discussion of Beato's work in "Topography and Memory: Felice Beato's Photographs of India 1858-1859." ([^](#))
- (2) For instance, Niall Ferguson's position as an apologist for empire and its globalizing ethos in *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* is the very opposite position of Ray Kiely's *Empire in the Age of Globalization*. I am aware of how complex the concept of Globalization in regard to empire studies is, as discussed in Antoinette Burton's essay "Getting Outside the Global: Re-positioning British Imperialism in World History." ([^](#))
- (3) See for instance, Nigel Thrift's "Space: The Fundamental Stuff of Human Geography" and Gibson Graham's "Beyond Global vs. Local: Economic Politics outside the Binary Frame." ([^](#))
- (4) This is a postulate of Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* adopted by Alison Blunt in her discussion of Mary Kingsley, in "Mapping Authorship and Authority: Reading Mary Kingsley's Landscape Descriptions." ([^](#))
- (5) See Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*, p.60. ([^](#))
- (6) Major Erlton's monomania however is not tied to Mutiny hysteria over the English woman as a victim of rape possibly because as Nancy Paxton has noted, "by the 1890s most professional British historians of the Mutiny agreed that English women were not raped during the Mutiny" (Paxton, 19-20). ([^](#))
- (7) Maine's first treatise was *Ancient Law*, followed by *Village Communities in the East and West*. For a discussion of these Victorian conceptualizations of race, see Theodore Kodiitschek's essay "Narrative Time and racial/evolutionary time in nineteenth-century British Liberal History." ([^](#))
- (8) See for instance, Ellen Goldberg's *The Lord who is Half Woman: Ardhanarisvra in Indian and Feminist Perspective*. ([^](#))

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