

EXPLORING HYBRIDITY IN FLORA ANNIE STEEL'S *ON THE FACE OF THE  
WATERS* AND *THE LAW OF THE THRESHOLD*

By

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by

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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Author Flora Annie Steel's current notoriety is limited mostly to her mutiny novel and her living twenty years with her husband in India, even though she certainly enjoyed a strong reputation as a talented and productive author in her heyday. Steel's critics have compared her work to that of Rudyard Kipling, and on at least one occasion a nineteenth-century reviewer mistakenly concluded that Kipling was the author of one of Steel's short stories. Indeed there is an interesting parallel in these authors' portrayals of colonial India; Kipling and Steel, however, do not share a parallel legacy of acclaim and notoriety. Unfortunately for Steel, being popular and prolific did not secure for her a strong place in the English literary tradition, but her depictions of colonial India deserve careful reexamination. In two of her novels, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) and *The Law of the Threshold* (1924), Steel deftly interweaves quotidian narratives that focus on the domestic sphere with various narratives of the political scene of colonial India. By representing the political and social dilemmas that existed—or might have existed—in

India, Steel creates a colonial discourse replete with ambiguous representations of control and authority. A close reading of the fluctuating power dynamics depicted in Steel's imperialistic narratives reveals what Homi K. Bhabha calls the hybridity of colonial discourse, which becomes for Bhabha an important site of displacement and subversion of colonial power. And so it is with Bhabha's methodology for estranging authority that I proceed to examine Steel's fiction.

Exploring hybridity in *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold* makes evident the instability and the ambiguity of colonial discourse which counter the authoritarian thrust of the literature of Empire and further the project of postcolonial theorists that seeks to investigate the tools colonizers used to create the institution of empire. These discussions allow us to interrogate and destabilize the representations of colonial power and thus enhance our understanding of the evident complex negotiations that existed between the colonizers and the colonized in the Indian context. Narratives demonstrating the subversion of authority and the instability of power may not be the stories colonizers are trying to tell; nonetheless, as we recognize the hybridity in colonial discourse, we allow for an acute alteration of the dominant discourse of colonialism. Therefore, investigating the representations, signs, symbols and figures of hybridity furthers the destabilization of colonial texts and demonstrates the destabilization of authority made possible through this focus on hybridity within discourse.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“‘Truth is not of hemispheres,’ retorted the old man. ‘Tis not even of our sphere’”  
(*The Law of the Threshold* 24)

Author Flora Annie Steel’s current notoriety is limited mostly to her mutiny novel and her living twenty years with her husband in India, even though she certainly enjoyed a strong reputation as a talented and productive author in her heyday.<sup>1</sup> Steel’s critics have compared her work to that of Rudyard Kipling, and on at least one occasion a nineteenth-century reviewer mistakenly concluded that Kipling was the author of one of Steel’s short stories.<sup>2</sup> Indeed there is an interesting parallel in these authors’ portrayals of colonial India; Kipling and Steel, however, do not share a parallel legacy of acclaim and notoriety. Unfortunately for Steel, being popular and prolific did not secure for her a strong place in the English literary tradition, but her depictions of colonial India deserve careful reexamination. In two of her novels, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) and *The Law of the Threshold* (1924), Steel deftly interweaves quotidian narratives that focus on the domestic sphere with various narratives of the political scene of colonial India. By representing the political and social dilemmas that existed—or might have existed—in India, Steel creates a colonial discourse replete with ambiguous representations of control and authority. A close reading of the fluctuating power dynamics depicted in Steel’s imperialistic narratives reveals what Homi K. Bhabha calls the hybridity of colonial discourse, which becomes for Bhabha an important site of displacement and subversion of colonial power.<sup>3</sup> As Bhabha indicates, “hybridity is a problematic of colonial

representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition” (“Signs” 114). And so it is with Bhabha’s methodology for estranging authority that I proceed to examine Steel’s fiction.

Exploring hybridity in *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold* makes evident the instability and the ambiguity of colonial discourse which counter the authoritarian thrust of the literature of Empire and further the project of postcolonial theorists that seeks to investigate the tools colonizers used to create the institution of empire. These discussions allow us to interrogate and destabilize the representations of colonial power and thus enhance our understanding of the evident complex negotiations that existed between the colonizers and the colonized in the Indian context. Narratives demonstrating the subversion of authority and the instability of power may not be the stories colonizers are trying to tell; nonetheless, as we recognize the hybridity in colonial discourse, “rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs” (Bhabha, “Signs” 112). Therefore, investigating the representations, signs, symbols and figures of hybridity furthers the destabilization of colonial texts because, as Bhabha explains it, “the display of hybridity – its peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorizes authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery” (“Signs” 115). In pursuing this analysis I hope to reaffirm how, in Bhabha’s words again, “such a reading of the hybridity of colonial authority profoundly unsettles the demand that figures at the centre of the originary myth of colonialist power” (115).



Steel's novels narrate the colonial situation from the position of the imperialist, which is a position of power, and a clearly defined category of identification in her culture. The obsessive reiterations in the nineteenth century of this subject position demonstrate an increasing anxiety over what it means to be a representative of the British Empire. In her discussion of the visibility and the presence of Empire in "Victorian domestic culture," Antoinette Burton makes an important claim about the power of imperial ideology:

Its [Empire's] imagery was virtually ubiquitous. . . . On biscuit tins, in museum displays, through the girl guides, and in commercial advertisements, Britain proclaimed its cultural superiority and encouraged Britons to identify with its power and its glory through imperial themes and visual images. Empire was, in short, not just a phenomenon "out there," but a fundamental part of domestic culture and national identity in modern Britain. (175)

As Burton's analysis indicates, the conceptualization of England as Empire is everywhere being repeated and refined for the culture at large, while historical and political accounts of the days of the Victorian Empire show unrest and uncertainty in government and popular opinion, both in the homeland and in the colonies. We see this tension dramatized in Steel's two novels, *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold*, as the solidarity of British identity in India is contested and disrupted through social and political unrest.

Though most critics of Flora Annie Steel conclude persuasively that Steel's narratives align with the dominant discourse of imperialism common to late Victorian culture, these analyses seem to elide the evidence of hybridity—narrated as inconceivability and incredibility—and its potential for disrupting and displacing Steel's authoritarian pursuits.<sup>4</sup> These crafted moments of inconceivability reveal the texts' hybridity as it is produced through the work of mimicry and stereotype, and thus this

inconceivability destabilizes the foundational and originary designs of the imperialistic narrative.

As Bhabha describes in “Signs Taken for Wonder,” part of the “display of hybridity” is the mimicry which “marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance” (121). In seeing this mimicry in a colonial discourse, Bhabha argues, “then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain” (121). In “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Bhabha explores the nuances of this analytical strategy and its disruptive potential. Recognizing mimicry within a text becomes for Bhabha a means for recognizing and articulating the “profound and disturbing” effect mimicry can have on the authority of colonial discourse (86). As Bhabha elaborates, in the construction of the mimic there is the “ambivalent world of the ‘not quite/not *white*’” (92). This ambivalence informs the symbolic function of the representations of the colonized subjects that have been crafted by the colonizers. Bhabha argues that “the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (88). The discourse of mimicry, according to Bhabha, “continually produces its slippage, its excess, its difference” and thus the colonial discourse is “stricken by an indeterminacy” which cripples its attempts at mastery (86).

Incorporating multiple occasions of English characters performing native identities, experiences which seem to be more pleasing than their real lives had been, Steel’s two novels enact this colonial mimicry. Bhabha’s assertion that mimicry is “at once resemblance and menace” stems from a careful look into colonial discourse and its

strategic formulations. Bhabha's elaboration speaks to Steel's demonstrations of this unusual vector of mimicry—colonizer copying colonized—even as he has conceptualized colonial imitation in terms of the colonized subject's creation within discourse. Bhabha indicates that through this “discursive process” of mimicry, the “excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not* quite) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” where “partial” means both “incomplete” and “virtual” (86). For Steel it is the closeness of self and other, the adoption of the native other by the English self that demonstrates fully Bhabha's excesses and slippages, and the novels, then, can be read as hybrid discourses of colonialism. This is demonstrated, for example, in *On the Face of the Waters*, as Steel's emblematic English couple recreates a native home in an attempt to establish a safe hideaway during the mutiny days. As English subjectivity is revealed to be the “incomplete” and “virtual” colonial subject in this situation, the text demonstrates the excesses of mimicry. This and other moments of copying by Steel's English characters destabilize the self/other, empowered/oppressed dichotomies.

Borrowing Bhabha's method for calling out the ambivalence of colonial discourse through an articulation of the “double vision” of mimicry and following Gail Ching-Liang Low's attention to colonial subjectivities which “seem paradoxically to be clogged by a relentless nostalgia and desire for the excluded others,” my investigations of Steel's colonial narratives reveal the failure of the colonizer's claim to power over representation (Bhabha 88; Low 3). In her study of subjectivity and colonial representation titled *White Skins/Black Masks*, Low clarifies the ambivalence of colonial discourse as she postulates

that this ambivalence “emerges from its [colonial discourse’s] split subjectivity” (198). Low locates this split at the foundational level of language: “its [colonial discourse’s] very language will inscribe absence, loss and lack within its assumption of agency” (198). It is therefore in the very grammar of Steel’s writing where I look to find the hybridity that demonstrates the authoritative and overreaching imperialistic gestures of *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold*. Thus in *On the Face of the Waters* as the auctioneers final words, “Going, going, gone,” parallel the fate of the colonial government’s authority in Delhi, the text reveals or, as Low says, inscribes, the precariousness of the authority it seeks to claim. And as John Anderson emphatically draws our attention to the incredibility and unbelievability of the social and political situations in *The Law of the Threshold*, the language of the novel calls attention to the waning power and authority of the colonial discourse in its attempt to reinscribe the other.

These two novels narrate the precariousness of the institution of government, and the threats to control that can and/or do occur in a colonial state. Insurrection, rebellion, uprisings, and discontentment are all serious concerns for the alien ruling power of a foreign territory, and a dilemma Steel repeatedly grapples with in her fiction. *On the Face of the Waters* at the core is a retelling of the historical events of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and surrounding this factual core is a rich fictionalization of life in Delhi. Published in 1896 this project makes Steel, who is still a relatively new author (her first novel was published in 1893), an important member of the literary world. In her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1929), Steel indicates the cultural importance of her mutiny novel: “the subject [of *On the Face of the Waters*] . . . It was one to touch all

hearts, to rouse every Britisher's pride and enthusiasm. The Indian Mutiny was then the Epic of the Race. It held all possible emotion, all possible triumph" (226).<sup>5</sup>

Although *The Law of the Threshold* is not narrating an historical "Epic of the Race," the recurrence of epic elements such as rebellion, reform, revolution, force, and containment, marks this text as an important continuation of Steel's earlier triumph. Finding this commonality between one of Steel's early novels (*On the Face of the Waters*) and her last novel (*The Law of the Threshold*) demonstrates Steel's persistent concentration on the narration of British power and control. Steel colors that power as generally satisfactory and particularly beneficial to India in both novels. As Steel indicates in her Preface to *The Law of the Threshold*, she supports the idea that the British "govern India" for the "good of the many" (vi). Though 1924 does not seem to mark any one specifically important historical or cultural moment in Indian and British history, *The Law of the Threshold* clearly draws attention to the gathering political and social unrest in India. This unrest has obvious roots in such organized activity as the mutiny in 1857, which is recalled frequently in the narrative, and the *swadeshi* movement organized around 1905.<sup>6</sup> Even as the turn of the twentieth century marks a time of a progressive narrative of the strength in Empire it is also true, as Sangeeta Ray clarifies in her analysis of the political situation in this time period, that British imperial strength is matched by Indian unrest. She writes, "At the same time that the forces of British imperialism seemed invincible, however, India was taking shape in the minds of an Indian elite as an oppressed society" (Ray 90). Therefore, the ripeness of conflict between colonizer and colonized, alluded to in this quote from Ray, preludes and thus provides the backdrop for Steel's narrative of Indian nationalistic fervor in *The Law of the Threshold*.

The theme that threads *On the Face of the Waters* to *The Law of the Threshold* is the recurring depiction of the “Inconceivable, incredible divergence! Unbelievable contradiction of actualities” and its corresponding conclusion, which is the last line of this quoted passage, “Yet both were true” (*Law* 273). This emphatically narrated inconceivability in *The Law of the Threshold* attests to the limit of the narration of mastery, and the combination of “yet” and “both” within the quote substantiates the theory that a colonial narrative shows itself, and here, self-consciously, as hybrid. This passage from *The Law of the Threshold* calls attention to the possibility of the impossible and thus hints at the way Steel’s colonial vision is affected by an ambivalence that allows us to see this as “a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and with them. The question of the representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority” (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry” 89). Locating and examining the possibility of the impossible becomes, then, the organizing principle of my reading of Steel’s two novels, *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold*. Finding a pattern in the reiteration of the inconceivable, the “contradiction of actualities,” and the unbelievable moments in these texts shows how within a colonial narrative there is the symbiotic existence of irresolvable actualities in a single space or place—the body, the home, the city. Highlighting the “problem of authority” in colonial discourses initiates a move away from a simplistic identification of West and East or self and other as separate and antagonistic realities and leads, hopefully, to “an understanding of the *process of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (Bhabha, “The Other Question” 67).

Flora Annie Steel, a self-identified strong-willed woman, reveals her masterminding techniques in her space for free reign, the preface. In many of her publications, Steel makes full use of these brief introductory pages to design and influence the reading of her work. These prefaces also serve to reinforce the significance of my analysis of the “unbelievable contradiction of actualities” embedded in these narratives. In her preface to *The Law of the Threshold*, Steel comments that her “purpose” in writing this novel “was to portray—as far as possible without comment—the strange contrasts, the almost unbelievable antagonism which exists in the India of to-day” (v). The underlying logic of the task that is made apparent in this preface demonstrates the degree to which colonial hybridity determines the knowledge of the colonizer: Steel endeavors to tell her story because of the “strange contrasts” that exist in the colonial state, and thus she highlights the complex layering of power and design in her narratives. These “strange contrasts” become, then, dynamic examples of the hybrid discourse that is “the articulation of the ambivalent space” of “desire” and “discipline” (Bhabha, “Signs” 112).

Within her preface for *On the Face of the Waters*, Steel clarifies the subject of her novel saying, “Regarding my fiction. An Englishwoman was concealed in Delhi, in the house of an Afghan, and succeeded in escaping to the Ridge just before the siege. I have imagined another; that is all. I mention this because it may possibly be said that the incident is incredible” (vi). In this passage Steel may be trying to justify her novelistic pursuit, or she may be trying to historicize her characters and thus legitimize her story. Whatever her intention, Steel’s prefatory comment indicates the interpretive possibilities available to the reader that are out of the control of the writer. Even while Steel is

marking her intentions and indicating guidelines for an appropriate reading of these two novels in their respective prefaces, she thwarts the novels' imperialistic pursuits by exposing the hybridity of her themes. In each of these prefaces, Steel indicates her intent to produce a colonial discourse full of the "incredible" events and "strange contrasts" existing in the India of her imagination and she does, therefore, represent the destabilizing hybridity of Bhabha's theorizing. The various occasions of mimicry and ambivalence in these texts highlight the non-fixity of Steel's narratives that become readable as the "colonial discourse [that] has reached that point when, faced with the hybridity of its objects, the *presence* of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert" (Bhabha, "Signs" 112).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) lived in India from 1867 to 1887. She published her first collection of short stories in 1884, and had more than 25 books (novels and collected short stories), along with two histories of India, a guidebook for Englishwomen in India co-written with Grace Gardiner, several pamphlets describing the condition of women, and an autobiography. In *European Women and the Second British Empire*, Margaret Strobel refers to Steel as a "famous and indefatigable British woman from the late nineteenth century" (8), and Margaret MacMillan in *Women of the Raj*, describes Steel as a "strong-minded and independent lady" who "knew far more about the country [India] than was considered necessary for a woman" (206).

<sup>2</sup> In her biography of Steel, Violet Powell writes, "owing to the enormous success of his Indian stories, it can have been no surprise to Flora when a reviewer wrote, 'this story is either by Kipling or Diabolus'" (71). The reviewer read Steel's short story "Lal" published in 1894.

<sup>3</sup> Hybridity has a long history of usage dating all the way back to the early 1600s, then developed more fully by the scientists of the nineteenth century and extending to its current multivalence. Scholars and researchers in the sciences and humanities continue to define and employ hybridity for various theoretical purposes. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), Robert J. C. Young discusses the development and the function—meaning and significance—of hybridity in western culture, and specifically for the British imperial world. He writes, "The word 'hybrid' has developed from biological and botanical origins: in Latin it meant the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, and hence, as the OED puts it, 'of human parents of different



‘races, half-breed’. The OED continues: ‘A few examples of this word occur early in the seventeenth century; but it was scarcely in use until the nineteenth.’ ‘Hybrid’ is the nineteenth century’s word. But it has become our own again. In the nineteenth century it was used to refer to a physiological phenomenon; in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one. While cultural factors determined its physiological status, the use of hybridity today prompts questions about the ways in which contemporary thinking has broken absolutely with the racialized formulations of the past”(6).

Young discusses more specifically Bakhtin’s and Bhabha’s slightly different and yet compatible theoretical work on hybridity in relation to discourse. Young writes, “For Bakhtin the undoing of authority in language through hybridization always involves its concrete social dimension. In an astute move, Homi K. Bhabha has shifted this subversion of authority through hybridization to the dialogical situation of colonialism, where it describes a process that ‘reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority’. For Bhabha, hybridity becomes the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other, enabling the critic to trace complex movements of disarming alterity in the colonial text” (22; *n*67: Bhabha quote from “Signs Taken for Wonders” 154).

In critiquing these various manifestations of hybridity and their cultural and political significance, Young continues his project of “contesting its [hybridity’s] contemporary pre-eminence” (25) as he asserts that “[h]ybridity thus operates within the same conflictual structures as contemporary theory” (27). He elaborates saying, “Hybridity in particular shows the connections between the racial categories of the past and contemporary cultural discourse: it may be used in different ways, given different inflections and apparently discrete references, but it always reiterates and reinforces the dynamics of the same conflictual economy whose tensions and divisions it re-enacts in its own antithetical structure” (27). Young concludes with a strong critique of the “general theoretical matrix” hybridity has become in the study of colonial situations and suggests a move toward a more focused link between “capitalism, colonialism and spatiality” (170). In this discussion he cites his influence from Deleuze and Guattari as he articulates, “We need to modify the model [of decoding and recoding] to a form of palimpsestual inscription and reinscription, an historical paradigm that will acknowledge the extent to which cultures were not simply destroyed but layered on top of each other, giving rise to the struggles that themselves only increased the imbrication of each with the other and their translation into increasingly uncertain patchwork identities” (173-4).

<sup>4</sup> See Patrick Brantlinger in *Rule of Darkness* (1988) for a general discussion of *On the Face of the Waters* as a mutiny novel. See Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire* (1993) for a complex investigation of the role of the English woman in *Face* and on Steel’s “feminist intervention” in the “public debates of the Ilbert bill” (97). Sharpe asserts that “Steel’s . . . story finds a place for English women’s agency in the Mutiny narratives by interrogating their presumed gender role” (97). Sharpe concludes that “the novel does not break with a colonial logic that explains the British retribution as a response to the massacre of innocents” (101). In her focus on the development of the Indian women in

*Face*, Sangeeta Ray, *En-gendering India* (2000), has the most forceful critique of Steel's project: "The initial objective outlook with which the novel begins . . . disintegrates into melodrama of the most lurid kind toward the end" (83).

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Saunders makes this similar argument in "Gender, Colonialism, and Exile: Flora Annie Steel and Sara Jeannette Duncan in India" (1989). Saunders writes, "Steel was a serious writer; of the 1857 rebellion, the subject of her novel, *On the Face of the Waters*, which she researched for years, she says, 'the Indian Mutiny was then the Epic of the Race. It held all possible emotion, all possible triumph' (*The Garden of Fidelity* 226). Clearly Steel felt herself called upon to write an important novel of Anglo-India" (307-8).

<sup>6</sup> Lord Curzon enacted the partition of the Bengal Presidency on July 19, 1905 and thus brought on the swadeshi movement. In Sumit Sarkar's historical book, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, he makes the claim that because of this five year period, 1903-1908, the movement has a "notable place in the historiography of nationalism and in the collective memory of our people" (1). And in her analysis of this historical moment, Sangeeta Ray writes, "The swadeshi movement, for all its divisions and ultimate failure, inaugurated a new age of intense challenge to the legitimacy of British rule" (93).

## CHAPTER 2

### UNORIGINAL ORIGINS AND COLONIAL COPIES

Noticeable in these aforementioned moments of incredibility or inconceivability, is a recurring theme of copying—or mimicking, back to Bhabha’s formulation—which threads through both these novels under examination. In his essay “Qual Quelle,” Derrida uses a statement from Valéry to begin to distance the notion of origin from foundation, and show the sourcelessness of source and the originlessness of origin. The quote reads: ““One must go back to the source—which is not the origin. The origin, in all, is imaginary. The source is the fact within which the imaginary is proposed: water wells up there. Beneath, I do not know what takes place?”” (qtd. in Derrida 228). Derrida shows how susceptible to questioning any logic is which relies on the primacy of origin. To further expose the function and technique of origin, Derrida writes: “Therefore, we should not be surprised if generality (the origin in general) becomes the accomplice of metaphoricity, and if we learn from the trope about the status of literal, proper meaning, the status of that which *gives itself as* proper meaning” (200-1). Derrida’s work, and his incorporation of Valéry’s proposal that “the origin, in all, is imaginary,” sets the stage for reading the use of origin in narrative as a strategy, a technique or, as Derrida says, the “accomplice of metaphoricity” (201). This theory of an absent or never-existent origin for copies enables a structural dismantling of the colonial ideology in both Steel’s texts, *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold*. Namely, if copy has no origin, and indeed creates the origin which it is seeking to copy, then the foundation for such groupings as primary and subsidiary, one versus the other, dialectic East versus West

falls apart. I would argue, therefore, that the multiple enactments of imitations or copies within these colonial texts—often noticeable by the accompanying “as if” narration—shake loose Steel’s imperialistic claims to truth, authority, or primacy of perspective.

In his theoretical unpacking of the colonial situation, Daniel Bivona uses a framework that recalls Derrida’s comments on the metaphorical power of origin in order to locate what he sees as the “incoherence” of the imperial mission. Bivona writes:

the East made available for imperial appropriation is inevitably made ‘too’ available, inevitably remodeled on the lines of an original which never was originating but which nevertheless still bears the signs of interdiction—both a spur to desire and a sign of the impossibility of satisfaction and complete assimilation.  
(25)

This idea of the availability of the East for the use and abuse by the West is a very important element in both the novels being examined in this study. The establishment of a native home by an English couple in *On the Face of the Waters* bears out the uncanniness and abjection felt in this “‘too’ available” association with the foreign and Other. This English man and woman, trying to escape the danger of recognition and capture during the days of the siege of Delhi in the Mutiny of 1857, establish their clandestine home in a rooftop apartment. The experience in this reconstructed or copied home becomes pleasing and desirable, even though it is marked as being *not* proper for these representatives of empire. It is, therefore, eventually abandoned, but not before the hybridity of colonial existence is acknowledged. It is the same technique of imitation, of copying, in *The Law of the Threshold* that raises the intratextual possibility of the impossible, the mutual existence of contradictions within a single space as a condition of the foreign or Other. Perhaps Steel’s most enigmatic character, Fred Ffolliott, is born an English gentleman, but he is choosing to live in India because of the intrigue and adventure he finds in this exotic locale, and he is employed by two Bolshevik-minded

revolutionaries to be a spy. A character of disguise and a good-natured troublemaker, Ffolliott passes as a Hindu jogi, and uses his ventriloquist mimicry of the goddess Dread Mother Kali to instigate serious unrest in the city that then leads to the kidnapping of two important characters, Charles Hastings and Maya Day.<sup>1</sup> The eventual return of the protagonist Charles Hastings to his bungalow, which signals in the text a more complete return to his rightful place as an English gentleman with good values and good judgment, comes about because Maya Day, a young Hindu revolutionary, sacrifices her life to save Charles Hastings. These episodes of copies and substitutions, and their disturbing effects, ripple through the texts and call attention to the existence of the familiar and the ultimately destabilizing unfamiliarity which haunts the colonizers in a colonial landscape.

In *On the Face of the Waters*, the establishment of the protective space on a Delhi rooftop is the second such rooftop house to be figured in the text, and thus becomes a site rich with comparison, copies, and their absent originals. This “home” becomes the hideaway or safe-house during the days of fighting for the disguised Kate Erlton, Jim Douglas, the child Sonny, and Jim’s servant, the Hindu widow Tara. Though these characters are not related, and have very little past acquaintance with each other, the crisis of the Mutiny throws these unlikely companions together. Kate has survived the first days of the chaos through good luck and patience and willingly accepts the aid of Jim Douglas who happens upon her as she is hiding out in an abandoned English bungalow. Jim devises the plan to keep Kate on a rooftop in order to protect her from the possibility of being discovered as a living English woman inside the city of Delhi, because, according to the logic of the book, her being discovered would mean her death.

In order to configure the situation on the rooftop appropriately and effectively, Jim must engage the help of his former servant Tara, who is a Hindu widow. Tara's presence and her commitment to Jim's plan are what ensure the safety and feasibility of Kate and Jim's situation. Examining the reiteration of "home" in the narrative sequence which establishes their safe-house demonstrates the breakdown of the supposed binaric or dialectic ideology of the narrative which pits East against West, and self against other. The plan to recreate the particulars of his first native home that sheltered him and his native mistress seems masterful to Jim Douglas. He decides to establish a home like this other one so that he can hide Kate and also himself. The parallel arrangements highlight the disparateness of the particulars, and the uncanniness of this duplication is revealed from Jim's perspective: "Yet, when it had grown, he almost shrank from it, so strange did it seem, in its linking of the past with the present. For Kate must pass as his wife—his sick wife, hidden, as Zora had been, on some terraced roof, with Tara as her servant" (*Face* 281). The strangeness of this recreation of home is uncanny, in Freud's sense of the term, because it is true here that "what is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*. In general we are reminded that the word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous . . . on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud 199). In the first description of the rooftop hideaway as a "linking of the past with the present," the text draws our attention to the way these two homes are going to be established as similar and different, as familiar yet strange.

These constructions of the rooftop show the narrative's investment in a notion of origin or originality of the good English domestic sphere with good English values; simultaneously, the constructions also show the performative nature of the narrative. Jim

Douglas obtains Tara's consent to act her part in this attempt to play house, "[t]herefore she [Tara] would arrange as she had arranged for Zora" (*Face* 282). Of particular interest here is the "as" in this narration: "she would arrange as she had arranged" before; the construction of this sentence speaks to the construction of the narration. In other words, Steel betrays her own technique as author as she invokes the power of creation and of design. Calling attention to this work of analogy reveals, then, the inherent process of copying associated with narrative. Tara's task is to make everything perfectly believable: "And the task had been done well. The outside square or yard of parapeted roof which he entered lay conventional to the uppermost" (*Face* 283). And if Tara is able to re-create the perfectly believable home, then she in effect demonstrates the way origins and foundations can be strategically mobilized for convincing, for fooling others, for faking it. Tara's mission mirrors Steel's mission as author. Everything being arranged, Douglas has put into action a plan that should ensure the life of Kate. The narration shows the faults very quickly, however: "And yet Jim Douglas felt a keen pang of regret when, for the first time, he gave the familiar knock of those old Lucknow days at the door of a Delhi roof" (*Face* 283). The familiarity of the "familiar knock" is actually unfamiliar and therefore disturbing; the uncanniness of the Delhi rooftop and of the reiteration of experience shows through and marks the text as representing the porous, uncontainable hybridity of the colonial experience.

The clearest level of discomfort concerning the copied rooftop house comes in the narration from Tara's perspective as Tara's jealousy and irritation at Kate's and Jim's relationship gets elaborated. It is a long passage but worth quoting in full in order to make visible the process that tries to establish home as institution:

Zora Begum had never played shatrinj 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. *That* she could crush with the cry of suttee. But *this*—this which to her real devotion seemed so utterly desirable; what did it mean?” (*Face* 347)

I recognize first the importance of the italicized “that” and “this” marking certain fully extant, understandable wholes that yet cannot be defined except in relational terms: that was that because this is this. In other words, the particular grammar of Tara’s jealousy demonstrates the degree to which these separate domains of Zora’s rooftop and Kate’s hideaway are deeply connected and dependent on each other for definition. To emphasize the interconnectedness of these homes and to qualify the origin which this rooftop seeks to copy, the narration describes the books, the soap and Kate’s darning socks in order to establish how, “it seemed as if the roof would soon be a very fair imitation of home” (*Face* 347).

All of these particularities mentioned about the home-space, and these specific actions of Kate that we see represented here, speak to the Victorians’ obsessive links between the domestic sphere and the imperial project. It is what Anne McClintock in her book, *Imperial Leather*, refers to as the “cult of domesticity” (34). McClintock asserts that the British colonies (and she focuses especially on Africa but acknowledges the connection to India as well) “became a theater for exhibiting” this “cult of domesticity” as the English colonizers established both their identity as national representatives in a foreign place, and also their rituals for organizing these foreign places. McClintock argues that it is “through the rituals of domesticity, increasingly global and more often than not violent, animals, women and colonized peoples were wrested from their



putatively ‘natural’ yet, ironically, ‘unreasonable’ state of ‘savagery’ and inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men” (35).

In drawing connections between domesticity and empire, many scholars focus on the dual function of English homes in the colonies as sites for the reproduction of Englishness and English national identity and as vehicles for extending control over foreign people and foreign lands.<sup>2</sup> Kate, Jim and Tara’s Delhi rooftop home certainly seems to carry with it these symbolic functions; it accentuates English identity as it usurps the colonial space of the other. And yet, in this borrowed house, with these disturbing and familiar mimics—Jim as an Afghan and Kate as his native mistress—and with the narrative impulse that labels this domestic space as a “fair imitation of home,” we see compromised boundaries and the hybridity of the space these colonizers and colonized inhabit.

The delivery of the child Sonny Seymour to the rooftop echoes and vividly contrasts the earlier delivery of Zora’s still-born child. Sonny is older than a toddler but younger than a school-aged kid, and comes to Kate and Jim’s safehouse by way of his native nanny, his *ayah*, who literally smuggled him away from danger when the attack on Delhi ensued by painting his skin to look like an Indian child, and drugging him to keep him quiet. Sonny represents survival, and provides the catalyst for a resurgence of energy, life, and hope for the rooftop house. The young English boy’s vital influence contrasts to the dread felt by Jim Douglas for his own “mixed” baby that his mistress Zora delivered. We get the most specific details in the narration from Jim Douglas’s point of view:

He felt that this incredibly peaceful home on the housetop could not last. Here he was looking at a woman who was not his wife, a child who was not his child, and

feeling vaguely that they were as much a part of his life as if they were. As if, had they been so, he would have been quite contented. More contented than he had been on that other roof. He was, even now, more contented than he had been there. As he sat, his head on his hand, watching the pretty picture which Kate, in Zora's jewels, made with the be-tinseled, be-scented, bedecked child, he thought of his relief when years before he had looked at a still little morsel lying in Zora's veil. (*Face* 357)

The rhythmic repetition of the phrase “as if” draws attention to the work of the myth-maker or author who is in the process of arranging and creating this representation of a home that is analogous to both an Indian home and an English home and can therefore be neither one nor the other absolutely but must always be the hybrid. The phrasing “as if” demonstrates constructedness rather than originariness or source, and indicates, through the comparison to something else, the narrative structure of allusion and reference. To draw out these implications further, I want to look at how the work of the “as if” exposes the colonialist's need for justification and recuperation of the imperial position. Empire is established by the continual keeping up of position: those who are in power must continually re-assert their power to remain in power. And the (if only momentary) undoing of this position of British power has happened historically and is happening within the novel all around this “pretty picture.” The presence of this simulacrum makes it possible to read the “as if” of Empire, and to name this institution a copy without origin.

The repeated negation of the not, “not his wife,” “not his child,” circles back to the “incredibly peaceful home on the housetop [that] could not last” and shows how the narration is haunted by the lack of an origin, the lack of a source for the performance of these relationships, namely, wife, child, husband, family, master, servant, home. The eruption of doubt concerning individual performative failures draws a connection to the institutional performance of the colonial project, which will also not last. There is no

authority for this mimetic rooftop house except for the authority of composition; this house is a creation of the colonial author and acted out by the colonial characters who are wrapped up in the ambiguity of mimicry.

This previously quoted passage goes on to develop a speculation on the authenticity and whiteness of Sonny's skin and therefore his goodness as an English child. Through the focus of Jim Douglas's eyes, Sonny is seen to be something a person could be "proud of possessing" and as "a boy who would go to school and be fagged and flogged and inherit familiar virtues and vices instead of strange ones" (*Face* 357). With the textual emphasis on comparisons, Sonny is like but not like Zora's stillborn child. And if Sonny's delivery copies Zora's delivery, and Sonny represents the origin of English inheritance, then English inheritance can be seen to be a copy of a nonexistent original. Also notable in this narration is the lack of authority for the relationships of these characters; Douglas is described at this moment as being happy with this "family" even though they are not sanctified or named as such by the necessary authorities, and especially since they are without a state government. All of these elements of copied, originless models demonstrate an absent British authority and the uncanniness in the recognition of hybridity and its destabilizing functions.

This "home" is copied again near the end of the novel as Jim Douglas's ailment sends him into unconsciousness where he remains under the care of Tara until she feels uncertain about her ability to help him. At this point Tara seeks out Kate even though she does so with "mingling of regret and approbation, jealousy and pride" (*Face* 460-1). Kate has just been musing on the "end" of her "dream" of being hidden away inside Delhi while fighting went on all around her and her life was in imminent danger.

Knowing her duty as a good Englishwoman to care for those in need, Kate of course returns with Tara. Tara has sought Kate out, even though Tara feels Kate has no more authority or control over the health of Jim Douglas, and she thinks to herself, “I have done all she could have done,” because Tara can be just as good a copy of a good Englishwoman as Kate can be of a native woman (*Face* 461). Tara brings Kate back to the rooftop house and tells her “There is no thing forgotten—no thing” (*Face* 462) and to corroborate the narration indicates that, “Everything was in its place. There were flowers in a glass, a spotless fringed cloth on the brass platter. The pity held in these trivial signs brought a fresh pang to her [Kate’s] heart for that other woman” (*Face* 464). Again, the reiteration of the composition of home shows that home can be established as long as “no thing” is “forgotten.” These signs are called “trivial” and yet there is nothing else which makes this a “home” and, therefore, this logic can be extended to say that trivial signs are all that is needed for “that other woman” to copy the institution believably. And Tara has certainly accomplished the effect of believability as is evidenced by the “fresh pang” in Kate’s heart.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In reference to the worship of Goddess Kali, Steel writes in the Preface to *The Law of the Threshold*, “Under many names, Mai Kali is worshipped throughout India—and particularly in Bengal—by the women” (vi). Steel takes this observation literally, perhaps, as she exhibits an interesting authorial license in naming and renaming the Goddess Kali. Throughout the novel, Steel includes various appellations for the goddess, seemingly interchangeably and without any apparent pattern or signification. Some examples are Dread Mother Kali-ma, Goddess Kali, Mai Kali, and the abbreviated Dread Mother.

<sup>2</sup> Though her work is not specifically on the fiction of the colonies, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), Nancy Armstrong establishes the paradigm for considering the symbolic importance of the domestic sphere as it is written about and constructed for Victorian culture through these fictions. In her conclusion, Armstrong writes, “The Victorian novel’s transformation of household space into an instrument that can be used

to classify any social group and keep it under observation does not make the novel simply one more instance of the relation of representation to power. The sudden appearance in the 1840s of novels that turned political information into a language of the modern self adds something to the theory of power. The prominence of domestic fiction suggests the degree to which such power did not in fact rely on overtly juridical or economic means so much as on cultural hegemony, that is, on the notion of the family, norms of sexual behavior, the polite use of language, the regulation of leisure time, and all those microtechniques that constitute the modern subject” (201).

More specifically concerned with the imperial implications of this power of the domestic sphere, Nupur Chaudhuri writes in “Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth Century Colonial India” (1988) that “the private sphere reflected, preserved, and promoted imperialist attitudes” (519). And in *Discourses of Difference* (1991) Sara Mills investigates the gendered construction of national identity and the importance of the domestic sphere in that development: “in the colonial context, British women were only allowed to figure as symbols of home and purity ... this is because of social conventions for conceptualizing imperialism, which seem to be as much about constructing *masculine* British identity as constructing a national identity *per se*” (3). In her wonderfully informative overview of the scholarship connecting domesticity and empire titled, “Imperial Chintz: Domesticity and Empire” (1999), Deirdre David comments on the complex power dynamics involved in the employment of the domestic sphere in imperialistic aims: “Victorian domesticity transplanted to the empire certainly served its hegemonic, didactic purpose in exhibiting the supposed superiority of a colonizing culture, but the women who arranged the domestic exhibition, so to speak, were not entirely passive agents of patriarchal imperialism” (569).

### CHAPTER 3 “GOING, GOING, GONE”: AUCTIONING OFF AUTHORITY

The first event narrated in *On the Face of the Waters* is an auction of the “menagerie” of the “lately deposed King of Oude” (1). This opening of the novel places the reader inside the commotion of this public spectacle occurring in the streets of Lucknow, and foregrounds the theme of conflicting and coexisting cultures of various groups of Indian and Anglo Indians in this colonial state. Steel heads the chapter with “Going, Going, Gone” and thus gives a curious foreshadowing to the Anglo Indian government’s loss of control of Delhi, which is the historic event about to be narrated. Since “going, going, gone” are the final words of the auctioneer, the phrase calls attention to the ritual of selling items to the highest bidder, and this ritual makes a significant comment on the quick exchange of valuables and the indeterminacy of ownership. Customarily, an auction may display belongings such as furniture and jewelry, but in this context, the first few pages of a mutiny novel, the narration clearly links the ritualized exchange of goods at an auction and ritualized exchange of property, kingdoms, and countries inherent in imperialism. This analogy to the assumption of property in an auction seems to appropriately characterize the appropriation of India by the English; also, it seems like a risky phrase to employ in a retelling of the story of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The next link in this string of associations brings out an even riskier implication of the auctioneer’s words: the phrase “going, going, gone” perhaps too accurately describes the reality of the role of the colonizer and shows how the power and control of the British empire is vulnerable, can be overthrown, and will eventually be gone.

The narration in this first chapter of the novel attempts to describe the importance of this spoken phrase, “Going, going, gone” which begins the text of the chapter. The description that follows reads, “The Western phrase echoed over the Eastern scene without a trace of doubt in its calm assumption of finality” (*Face* 1). This sentence is emblematic of a narrative pattern within the text that shows Steel attempting to present a nuanced analysis of situational evidence while still relying on unexamined definitions and categories. This pattern, then, makes it possible to explicate and expose the narrative assumptions and the faultlines within Steel’s colonial discourse. For example, it seems at first that this scene divorces West from East, echoing Kipling who is famous for penning that “East is East and West is West, and ne’er the twain shall meet,” but the falseness of this dialectic quickly shows through and the intricacies of the middle ground—the logical limits and the representational limits of colonial law, experience, culture—reveal the various discourses coming from the “tongue that is forked,” the discourse of colonialism (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry” 85).

The auctioning of a deposed King’s belongings is portrayed in this novel with seriousness but seems also to demonstrate a bit of the absurdity of the colonial situation. With all of the formality of a public auction, this system with its protocol, process, and procedure, is a ritual that closely parallels the nature of colonization and hence, the scene in Lucknow exposes the clash of cultures, the plundering nature of empire, and points to the text’s ambivalence. The performance of the sale of a king’s belongings makes the scene a sensitive one to examine, because it speaks to the possibility of reduction of power, the loss of one’s belongings, and the loss of ownership, all delicate issues for the British empire in India both around the time of the Mutiny and in the late 1890s, the years

during which Steel is writing the novel. This auction shows culture to be reduced to biddable material, and thus makes it possible to read the instability of ideology and the instability of the imperial ideology guiding the British presence in India.

Steel allows sentiment to color the reading of the “Easterners” at this auction. Clearly all sympathy goes to the Moulvie from Fyzabad, the old man in the green turban, as he is described in the narration, who loses his cockatoo because the Huzoors are too busy and too incompetent to pay attention to the details of the situation they dominate. This scene shows the reprehensible actions of the colonizers and draws attention to the fallibility of the British government in India. In this excerpted sentence, “The Western phrase echoed over the Eastern scene without a trace of doubt in its calm assumption of finality,” we can see the excessive narrative energy which shows itself to be contrived. The last half of the sentence pounds out an overdone sense of solidarity and confidence with the phrases, “without a trace of doubt,” “calm assumption,” and “finality,” which are concepts that counter the logic of the auction scene itself. The textual overplay is especially apparent since “calm assumption” and “finality” are two privileges soon to be taken away from the British as the onset of the mutiny is not far from the day of this scene. Furthermore, even with all of this “calm assumption” at the auction, the text reveals itself to be already undermined by the inherent process at auctions of transference and exchange of property from one party to another. This system of exchange and commodification emphasizes the notion that autocracy and authority are predicated on only the most precarious criteria—being the highest bidder—and therefore the text is implicated in revealing the precariousness of assumptions with the inclusion of “calm assumption” in the opening line. It is, in fact, the very logic of the auction which shows



us that there is no finality and that there is no absolute origin or source of possession.

And this cyclical nature of auctions demonstrates that there will always be something else to be auctioned off, including British ideology and colonialist ideology that divides East from West, subject from object.

The only specific item we witness the auctioning of is the cockatoo, a pale white bird with gray scaly feet and beak, and a flame-coloured crest which “raised like a fiery flag as the bird gave an ear-piercing scream: ‘For the Faith! For the Faith! Victory to Mohammed!’” (8). The bird should never have been auctioned since it did not actually belong to the deposed King, but belongs instead to the Moulvie from Fyzabad who is desperately trying to recover his pet throughout the auction scene. The mobility of this bird—becoming the property/pet of several English people, being claimed by the mutineers as a mascot for rebellion, and finally ending up at another king’s palace only to die from neglect—demonstrates a long process of identification within this colonial discourse. The bird, then, embodies the “process of splitting” which is “the condition of subjection . . . where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different* – a mutation, a hybrid” (Bhabha, “Signs” 111). The important disruptive force of this bird, then, is its slipping through, or more literally, flying through, multiple significations and displacing the authority of the discourse which attempts to contain it.

The bird has been bought by Major Erlton, an adequate member of the British army in India, as a gift for his mistress Alice Gissing, a British woman of questionable moral character. Alice dismissively gives the bird away to Kate who is the pathetically good and noble wife of the Major. After a short residence with Kate, the bird’s next keeper is

Sonny Seymour, a sweet young boy who is certainly the hope and future of the British empire, whose interest in the bird prompts Kate to let Sonny keep the bird. Continuing this pattern of mobility and fluid signification, the bird flies away from Sonny Seymour's house at the very beginning of the rebellion in Delhi, and it goes on to play a vivid part in the Mohammedan fight for freedom as it is dyed bright green (the color representative of and claimed by the Mohammedans or Muslims) and as it is heard crying out the battle call. The bird also represents, then, an amalgamation of strength and containment: changing hands, houses, colors and meanings, but retaining its cry for Mohammed's victory, the bird reminds us in a dramatic way that the Other can never fully be contained.

Jim Douglas's comments about the bird perhaps qualify this best. After Alice Gissing is killed by a Muslim man going after the bird, the text reads: "‘If I had time,’ muttered Jim Douglas fiercely, ‘I would go and wring that cursed bird's neck! But for it—’" and there the text leaves off. So it could be Douglas thinking the bird is the cause of the fighting from its chanting, and hence its symbolism, or it could be that he only sees it as a connection to Alice and her death. Or, it could be that he sees the cockatoo as representative of his own failure and his own defeat. Next, the bird becomes connected to the only semblance of power and authority on the side of the Indians: the cockatoo becomes the favorite of the "Dream King," the ruling Moghul king of the city of Delhi, as the bird follows him "from Audience Hall to balcony, from balcony to bed" (*Face* 335). Therefore, the bird represents a connection to the nobility, to the rulers, as well as the religious zealot, and the young English boy. The love of the bird, then, transcends class, nationality, motive, and ownership, and shows the interconnectedness of lives in a colonial setting.

The first English words Sonny speaks to Kate on the rooftop house after they are in hiding, are “What has a-com of my polly?” (*Face* 351). With this possessive claim of “my polly,” Sonny could be seen as representative of all Englishmen, as his self-proclaimed connection to this ambiguous bird condenses the role of the colonizer in a colony state. Sonny wants to claim the polly that is already an emblem of Muslim freedom and religiosity, and a special pet of the King of Delhi. The polly is no longer his, and arguably was never rightfully his since it was not the property of the king whose belongings were being auctioned, but he remembers his possession of it and its connection to Kate.

The final discussion of the bird displays its uncontained or uncontrolled signification, and demonstrates how this symbol of both freedom and captivity has the potential to disrupt the imperialistic narrative’s overtures for a singularity of meaning. Major Morecomb and Kate Erlton converse about it:

“Hadn’t you a white cockatoo, once? When you first came here. I seem to recollect the bird making a row in the veranda when I used to drive up.” Her face grew suddenly pale, she sat staring at him with dread in her eyes. “Yes!” she replied with a manifest effort, “I gave it to Sonny Seymour because—because it loved him—” she broke off, then added swiftly, eagerly, “What then?” “Only that I found one in the Palace to-day. Well! I saw a brass cage hanging high up on a hook—there had been no loot in the precincts, you know, for the Staff has annexed them; I thought the cage was empty till I took it down from sheer curiosity, and there was a dead cockatoo.” “Dead!” echoed Kate, with a quick smile of relief. “Oh! How glad I am it was dead.” “They are cruel devils, Mrs. Erlton.” The Major has used the self-same words to Alice Gissing eighteen months before, and in the same connection. Even so the coincidence of the bird itself absorbed her. And the knowledge gave her an unreasoning comfort. To begin with, it seemed to her as if those fateful white wings, which had begun to overshadow her world on that sunny evening down by the Goomtee river, had ceased to hover over it. And then the rounding of the tale—for that bird was little Sonny’s favorite she did not doubt—made her feel that Fate would not leave that other portion of it unfinished. The inevitable sequence would be worked out somehow. She would hear something. (*Face* 451-52)

In this quote, the presence of the bird in the lives of many demonstrates how definition and identity are situational, and, further, that authority and foundation are ephemeral. Kate's face "goes pale" perhaps because the bird recalls to her painful memories of her dead husband and his dead lover, Alice Gissing; the bird was not a symbol of their love, but certainly of their relationship as Major Erlton made such a spectacle of himself in bidding for the bird at the public auction so that he might impress Alice. The memory more dearly perhaps, and even more painfully, felt comes from the bird's connection to Sonny Seymour, as he first lisped to Kate, "Oh, Mifis Erlton! What *has* a come of my polly," upon awakening in their hideaway on their Delhi rooftop home. The bird's recurrence in Kate's life is not just the "coincidence" that is narrated in this passage; it is a marker of contrasting actualities which are named as part of an "inevitable sequence" in Kate's life. This "inevitable sequence," said to be controlled by "Fate," shows the bird's mobility and its significance in various lives, houses, and circumstances. The bird passes through many lives and situations, and as it is figuratively laid to rest in this conversation between Kate and Major Morecomb, Kate's reiteration of the importance of this creature seems to link the two inextricably. The sympathetic identification Kate has with the bird appears as enjoyable and somewhat disturbing for her, and thus functions as a symbol of Kate's incorporation and appropriation of the other within herself.

#### CHAPTER 4

##### IMITATION AND THE UNCANNY IN *THE LAW OF THE THRESHOLD*

In *The Law of the Threshold* Steel is telling the story of the struggles and conflicts that occur in trying to bridge tradition and modernity, or to merge old and new. Locating all of the action in the bridged city of old Puranabad and new Nawapura, Steel structures the novel around the difficulty of coexisting in contradictory modes, and shows how this tension causes various forms of eruptions. Literally, these tensions and eruptions are represented in a couple of bomb explosions in the streets, and figuratively, they are played out in various characters' flirtations with dangerous love, revolutionary occupations, or life-threatening adventures. Maya Day is the principally motivating and motivated character who represents this thematic conflict most acutely.

Maya Day's character connects all the loose threads of the narrative; she is the nexus of intersecting plots and she embodies the theory of the "threshold" which organizes the novel. Maya is a devoted Tantric who has lived in America for many years, but was born of Eastern descent and on Indian soil. She is almost always shrouded in the traditional Hindu widow attire of an all-white sari and veil, and yet she has returned to India with a political agenda that requires her active participation in public speeches, demonstrations, and meetings. Strict adherence to Hindu custom would require Maya, as a widow, to remain isolated and even invisible to the public sphere. Maya serves the narrative as "a house divided against itself" because she represents the negotiation between the old and the new, combining Eastern and Western, tradition and change (*Law* 145). Maya's mission to educate and revolutionize Indian society brings her in contact

with all of the characters in the novel and electrifies this area of India in which she has come to work. The threat of Maya's mission, and by extension political and social change in India, seems to be contained or thwarted when Maya sacrifices herself to save the life of the British soldier Charles Hastings. Maya's presence and effect, however, is ghostly and long-lasting; she is one of many "unbelievable" contradictions embedded in this novel.

The reiteration of inconceivability and the element of surprise in the everyday lives of characters in *The Law of the Threshold* demonstrates the possibility of the impossible or the mutual existence of contradictions within a single space. John Anderson, Fred Ffolliott, and Charles Hastings represent three additional elements of ambivalence within this colonial discourse. The expression of inconceivability in the narrator's voice from the perspective of John Anderson, the ever-analytical and knowledgeable professor/physician, demonstrates the hybridity within this text. The apt ventriloquism and clever disguises of Fred Ffolliott demonstrate a strategic use of mimicry and imitation that calls attention to the performativity of colonial existence. Charles Hastings, as a member of the British military, may represent the dominance of the colonizers, but the circumstances around his kidnapping and the circumstances around his subsequent uncanny return to his bungalow and his life, elucidate the frailties of authority and the need for Englishmen to be saved from their own fallibility.

The most intriguing understanding of the disappearance of Charles Hastings and Maya Day, clearly the climactic event of the novel, is in the mind of John Anderson. As a pragmatic academic character, Anderson's analytical mind consistently evaluates and situates meaning and significance for the reader. Charles Hastings is kidnapped by

several fanatical followers of the cult at the Temple of Mai Kali because of his associations and flirtations with Maya Day, a character who draws terrible criticism and hatred from the jogis at the temple. Charles and Maya are taken together to the Temple of Mai Kali and are in danger of being sacrificed to the Dread Mother in order to fulfill the Dread Mother's call for an offering of human blood. An interesting plot twist reveals, however, that this call for blood is not authentic but has been falsified by an Englishman whose primary goal is to instigate riots among the Indian people in order to aid a Bolshevik rebellion. In other words, this is a wonderfully complex scenario involving all the characters and all the interests of the book.

Among all of these plot lines, the most vivid element of this crisis is the disappearance (kidnapping) of Charles Hastings and the simultaneous disappearance of Maya Day. Being unaware of the falsified call for blood at the temple and the wrath against Maya Day and her mission by Mai Kali's followers, and being unaware of the developing Bolshevik plots, John Anderson contemplates the mystery of Captain Hastings' disappearance, and he is struck by a contrast between the seemingly unaffected continuation of life around him and the enormity of the disappearance of someone like Charles Hastings. It is in this moment of philosophical ponderings that the hybridity of this colonial text bursts forth. The narration reads, "Inconceivable, incredible divergence! Unbelievable contradiction of actualities. Yet both were true" (*Law* 273). The "actualities" that seem so contradictory are first, Anderson's memory of Lucy's thoughts about Hastings, "I hope they didn't torture him;" and second, the calls from the "natives" inviting the English Anderson into the Indian social club for a drink.

This description of Anderson's experience, which from the excessive punctuation of multiple exclamation points, produces the effect of shouting out of the truth, and demonstrates how the natives are narrated to be congenial, warm, inviting, inclusive (as the people at the club are) and evil, dangerous, barbaric, punishing (as the potential torturers would be). India, then, is at once both these sides as Steel organizes them. This passage and its interpretations represent the hybridity and non-fixity of Steel's project in *The Law of the Threshold*. This representation demonstrates an attempt at mastery within the colonial narrative—defining India as this *and* that—but with the overplay of surprise, unbelievability, and inconceivability, the groundwork of definition is continually undercut and the colonial narrative is revealed to be lacking in the authority it seeks to claim.

The character Fred Ffolliott, a “gentleman by birth,” is described as being “overfilled with a reckless spirit of adventure” (*Law* 36). He has “drifted to India” and made good use of his “genius for impersonations,” and even though he may be mischievous, he is “absolutely disinclined to do any mean trick”—unless, of course, if one considers an impersonation of the Dread Mother Kali a “mean trick” (*Law* 36). Fred Ffolliott, or FFF, “as he was generally called,” infiltrates a private group of mendicants, looking like a “wandering ascetic” and a “dandified *jogi*” (*Law* 36, 26). This “dandified” *jogi*'s presence at the meetings in the Temple of Mai Kali allows Ffolliott to take on the role of an instigator within a powerful arena. Ffolliott's financial needs are met by two characters who represent a Bolshevik faction in India, but Ffolliott seems completely impervious to political alliance, and moral judgment, and is instead a man of disguises for the intrigue of it. This characterization noticeably elides and erases the political import



of Ffolliott's role and his actions. Very early in the novel, the moment in which Ffolliott casts his voice for the first time as the Dread Mother Kali is elaborately narrated: "It was a woman's voice, clear, cold, distant, heard distinctly from the little strips of now star-spangled sky that was all the courtyard owned of God's making" (*Law* 31). And the intensity of the goddess's words heightens the spectacle of this incredible moment:

"Listen! Oh! Ye who hear," it said. "Listen and learn! I, Womanhood incarnate, speak. . . . For I am the Blood and the Life! Give Me of it to drink, O! my people; for I am not satisfied with the blood of lambs and goats; yet without blood is no remission of sins. That is My message to My people! Take it ye holy ones, proclaim it to every woman in every village. Without blood is no remission of sins." (*Law* 31-2)

This emphatic call for blood and human sacrifice by the gentleman-born Englishman dressed up as a dandified jogi, performing the role of a female deity and casting his voice, reverberates with the pageantry of a circus act. Ffolliott still disguised as the jogi is even the vehicle of commentary for his "awed" audience: "Then from the corner where the dandified *jogi* sat came his strong masculine voice proclaiming the miracle—a marvelous miracle" (32). With the narrator's qualification that news, even if embellished news, of this miracle "was passing from lip to lip with the marvelous, almost unbelievable rapidity with which news spreads itself in India," we see again a construction of the unbelievable revealed as almost but not quite wholly foreign or other (33). This episode at the Temple of Mai Kali has several resonating effects: British control and strength are tested and weakened by one of its *own* gentleman-born Englishmen; the flaring up of "dissent" flows out to the entire village; and the atmosphere of Puranabad and Nawapura is electrified. The imitation of a sacred role shows how even a miracle is replicable, and this imitation event reinforces the idea that authenticity works

as a strategy that is used in a colonial narrative in an attempt to separate the foreign from the self, and yet ends up reiterating the obvious hybridity of colonial existence.

The insurrection that follows these falsified miracles is experienced most frightfully in the abduction of Maya Day and Charles Hastings. The kidnapping takes place in the bedroom of Charles Hastings' bungalow where he and Maya are sharing in the "first ecstasy of mutual passion" with kisses, hugs, and verbalization of love and adoration (*Law* 252). Marking this moment as the expression of "first ecstasy" draws attention to the possibility of an endless reiteration of shared passion—if there is a "first ecstasy," then there can be a second, third, and so on. And in this "first ecstasy" as the desire for the other is expressed and acted upon, the dangerousness of this easy slippage between cultural boundaries is heightened by the dramatic containment of these characters that follows.

In their shared erotic moment, the narration says "they forgot all else. The world, danger, difficulty, all things slipped from them" (*Law* 253). As Maya Day and Charles Hastings release themselves from all these things, they are captured by the assailants who wish to sacrifice Hastings to the Dread Mother Kali. The logic of this scene demonstrates that the evilness, then, is not just the "slender fingers, lithe as a snake's coil" which bind Hastings' hands, waist and feet and gag Maya and Charles, but it is also in the forgetfulness of these two characters that they would allow themselves the physical expression of love. As Maya Day has earlier articulated to John Anderson, "surely you *must* understand how mean it would be to let him throw away his chance—to cheat him of his right of perfect fatherhood—to let him forget his race—his own self, as it were"

we are meant to understand that the stakes are high in a colonial culture where race seems to define one's destiny (*Law* 177).

The narration's description of Hastings in the temple drives home the horror of punishment for transgression: "There he [Hastings] was, almost unconscious, the blood streaming from his wounded arm, bruised and battered by his vain struggles against his captors, bound to a sacrificial post" (*Law* 255). The first intervention for freeing Hastings comes from Fred Ffolliott, disguised again as the dandified jogi. Ffolliott whispers in Maya's ear, "Be quiet! I've sent for relief. I'll put off time," and the following narration "Incredible! Impossible!" reinscribes the code of surprise developed in this narrative (*Law* 256). Ffolliott's method for putting off time and thus saving the life of Charles Hastings is a second casting of his voice as he imitates again the Dread Mother Kali and taunts those present at the temple: "Didst think me a miracle? Lo! a cursed alien deceived you. I am nothing but a beastly red crab . . . I called for no blood . . . 'Twas the false *jogi* . . . I am nothing, nothing!" (*Law* 258). The confusion in this quote of first person and third person and the tumultuousness of this scene reinforces the anxiety produced by this incredible—and altogether too credible—interconnected and interdependent existence of English and Indian lives within the narrative. This slip into and out of danger for Hastings, Ffolliott, and Maya Day, within a native temple, highlights the hybridity of this colonial discourse: proximity needs to be intensely and barbarically controlled and yet experienced. In other words, simultaneously in the dominance over the disruptive and violent jogis at the temple and the quelling of any more of the romance between Maya Day and Charles Hastings there is the "trace of what

is disavowed” which therefore “makes the recognition of its [discourse of cultural colonialism] authority problematic” (Bhabha, “Signs” 111).

Charles Hastings’ return to his bungalow, and by extension his life *fixes* the crisis of the book: he is returned with a note pinned to his bandage, his wound is miraculously healed, he has no memory of his passion for Maya Day, he does not remember being abducted and almost slaughtered at the Mai Kali temple, and most importantly, what he does remember is his love for his fiancée, the good Englishwoman Lucy Morrison. John Anderson and Lucy Morrison provide the interpretation of Hastings’ return, and they continue this trend of acting for Hastings and designing his life so that he remains saved, even from himself. Hastings’ return to his good Englishness occurs in his bungalow, a domain of Indian structure and form occupied by an Englishman; this construction seems to recall the uncanniness of home for the British in Indian territory. Home is always already slightly unfamiliar because a bungalow can never be fully English.

Lucy’s reading of the note pinned to Hastings’ bandage, “For God’s sake, be kind to him” moves the responsibility of Hastings’ care from one woman to another (*Law* 277). Hastings then becomes a marked man, a claimed man, as he was under the care of Maya Day, and now he has been returned to the care and possession of another woman, Lucy Morrison. This pinned note becomes his appendage, a part of his body but extraneous, too. It is a hand-written note folded with Lucy’s name appearing on the outside, so that it has the effect of a name-tag, and Hastings is named as Lucy’s or one-in-the-same as Lucy. The note is on native paper and written by one who is, arguably, native. The native woman, then, has defined and marked Captain Hastings, the pillar of British authority. Maya Day has been the force that saves Hastings and she therefore

grants him his life, his future, and his Britishness. Lucy's heart melts when she finds "Boy," as she calls Hastings, sleeping peacefully in his bungalow, and the narrative of their marriage and domestication dominates the rest of the story. This seems an obvious way of attempting to reclaim the novel from the indeterminate—to depoliticize the events and the narrative—and to bring the story back home to the union of the rightful administrators of Empire. So it seems that this note and this body being re-discovered, and returned, does solve everything. The troubles over the Mai Kali shrine are dropped because Hastings doesn't remember anything and Maya has sacrificed herself for his return, the uneasiness over Eastern and Western mixing is relieved as Hastings recalls only his fondness for Lucy and Lucy reciprocates, and the future of Britishness and the empire remains optimistic through their connection and their progeny. Named Lucy Maya Hastings, Charles and Lucy's child seems finally to attest to the truth in hybridity as she is a dual presence: a reminder of the inevitable combination of native and British in the colonial state. As Lucy quips to John Anderson, "Boy would have it Lucy; but, of course, I shall call her Maya," Steel's text is reinscribed with the ambivalence of colonial mimicry (*Law* 306).

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

The title of Steel's mutiny novel, *On the Face of the Waters*, is lifted directly from the first chapter of Genesis in the Christian Bible. The text which prefaces this one phrase is highly indicative of the ethos of the novel, in that it establishes the project of the Judeo-Christian God's creation efforts: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1.1-2.). The whole sense of creation and authorization—the story of Genesis and the role of a creationist God—seems an important key to understanding Steel's discourse on civilization in the colonial context. By designing the text around this theological principle, Steel makes a claim for her own powers of creation and authority. The further resonances of the "formless void" suggest the existence of something originary, chaotic, and vacuous, something in need of and ready to be shaped, molded, and formed. Inserting colonized and colonizer or native and British into this formulation gives a clear sense of the position and the self-assigned role of the British: feeling themselves in charge of the inchoate India(ns) and also using that as the justification for their presence, namely that inchoateness needs help developing along civilized lines.

The title *The Law of the Threshold*, like the setting of this novel, represents a significant concern in this narrative: the possibility of change and the experience of transitions. The old town, Puranabad, and the new town, Nawapura are bridged together and thus symbolize the ideological battles going on in the narrative over old India and

new India, or tradition and modernity. The specific explanation of the “law of the threshold” is articulated by John Anderson as, “The very elementary proposition that before you can be another thing, you must cease to be one thing, and that therefore there must be a breach of continuity. India’s in that breach at the moment; so for God’s sake let the cat sit on the wall and make up her mind which way she’ll jump” (*Law* 12). Told to the American Nigel Blennerhasset, Anderson’s comment highlights the potential for reading within that breach, and the text shows itself as opening up a space apart from the dominant discourse of imperialism. This narration of India in “that breach,” exposes the faultlines, the dualities, and the experiential fluidity of the hybrid colonial experience. Focusing in on the catharsis involved in this story of India, we also see how the threshold symbolizes and organizes the text’s concern with change. The novel focuses in on change in the social or cultural realm and speaks to the possibility of change in the political realm, most notably in the form of an attempted Bolshevik revolution and the organizing of an Indian nationalist movement. The prevailing attitude toward change makes change something drastic, showing how in change there is always a loss and a gain, while loss is clearly emphasized. The rhetoric of change in the novel is characterized by sacrifice and the search for salvation. Even though the British control over India remains intact in this novel as it does in *On the Face of the Waters*, *The Law of the Threshold* remains, somehow, more indeterminate and less convincingly concluded.

Ending *On the Face of the Waters* with an appendix, Steel seeks another opportunity to hem-in the various conflicts that thread the narrative. This last attempt at mastery comes in the form of a personal letter from one of Kate Erlton's acquaintances in India, Charles Morecomb, a fellow military man who served with Major Erlton, Kate’s

now-dead husband. Charles Morecomb's primary purpose for writing to Kate seems to be his desire to send his best wishes for the newly married couple, Kate Erlton and Jim Douglas. His letter reads, "I have not wished you luck—that goes without saying; but tell Douglas I'm glad he had his chance" (*Face* 475). The mutiny having been subdued and the re-conquest of the British made apparent, the novel turns back to its equally important theme, the love story between Kate Erlton and Jim Douglas. The novel ends, then, with a strong domestic union between a much-deserving English man and English woman. This union seeks to recuperate the threat of political unrest in its promise of solidarity, strength, and overall goodness. Morecomb's letter also reads, "This report, then, will carry you on in the story" of Anglo Indian and Indian life in the days after the Mutiny. The story is short, for Morecomb, as he sees it: "it is all over except the shouting; except honours and hangings" (*Face* 475). And as the letter continues in great detail about certain people escaping and others being punished, the tone remains noticeably familiar and chatty. But even as Morecomb's letter seems to wrap up the narrative of the Mutiny by telling the reader how British authority and control has been rightly returned in India, Steel's appendix reinforces the artificiality of any such attempt at mastering the colonial discourse.

*The Law of the Threshold* ends with a pairing up of two loving, good, strong, English characters similar to the union of Kate and Jim Douglas in *On the Face of the Waters*. Lucy Morrison and Charles Hastings are married, and the end of the novel celebrates the christening of Lucy Maya, the offspring of this happy domestic union. But what haunts this novel is the mystical and mystifying disappearance of Maya Day into the hills. John Anderson has gone to the Valley-of-a-Thousand-Trees in search of Maya and



he himself goes through a spiritual awakening of the Self beyond Self, and learns from the Most-Learned-One that “if the Self hates Self as not Itself, there is no understanding” (*Law* 300). And this might, after all, be the moral of the story. This message of the unification of the individual to all the world, coupled with the misty vision of the ghost of Maya Day, reveals this novel as incapable of representing absolute dominance or control of colonial subjectivity. Maya Day appears to John Anderson in a “shadowed niche in a vast temple” on a “carven altar” (*Law* 302-3). Her appearance is described as,

a woman’s head; the rippling hair bound by a crown of jasmine stars, flowing from the broad, calm brow to fall over the low pedestal to the ground where it lay in soft curls amongst the heaped-up offerings of fresh flowers. The heavy eyelids were closed as if in sleep, the curves of the mouth showed calm, composed. No smile there, no shade of content or discontent in the whole beautiful, reposeful face. (303)

This disembodied representation of femininity and spirituality leaves the end of this novel with an eerie and haunting lack of closure.

Flora Annie Steel’s two novels, *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold*, though tightly organized around pro-British themes and perspectives, also develop broad and complex narratives which occasionally display surprising and “unbelievable” moments of hybridity. Steel’s oft-repeated self-proclaimed mission is to represent life in India, and in these two novels she fictionalizes the British Empire and colonialism as a real-life experience. It is clear, however, in these two texts, that a narrative attempting to fix something as undecidable as India— as a nation and as a culture— relies on foundations that are readable as not originary but contingent on excessive reiteration and invention. These texts, therefore, demonstrate an ambivalence derived from the proximity and the interconnectedness of the colonial experience. The hybridity of these colonial discourses appears in copies without origins, imperialists’

mimicking of the colonial other, and the disturbing yet desirable “contradiction of actualities” that haunt *On the Face of the Waters* and *The Law of the Threshold*.

Inevitably, there are those who disagree with this theoretical perspective. Though never disregarding Bhabha’s contributions and influence in postcolonial theory, some postcolonial scholars and activists criticize Bhabha’s theories for being too formalistic and not accounting for the materiality of the specific historical, political and social conditions of colonial existence. In “Overworlding the ‘Third World,’” Ania Loomba describes her own and other critics’ initial criticisms of Bhabha’s work.<sup>1</sup> Loomba focuses in on “all that Bhabha does not care to see” in “socio-economic terms” and in the “production of hegemony” that she sees as the fundamental elements of colonial discourse and the colonial experience that need to be addressed (174). Loomba’s more directed commentary on Bhabha’s concept of hybridity criticizes Bhabha’s work for its lack of specificity. She writes, “Despite Bhabha’s hybridity thesis, the colonial subject in his work is remarkably free of gender, class, caste or other distinctions” (182). I would argue, however, that Bhabha’s theoretical work does not deny this materiality, even if it is not explicitly included, and that these concerns can be addressed through a close reading of the language that produces the colonial subject. Bhabha’s analysis focuses on the articulation of culture and the discourse of subjectivity and thus provides the tools for investigating the representation of culture and subjectivity; hence the materiality of culture can be assessed and evaluated as it is specifically reproduced.

In her introduction to *White Skins/Black Masks* Gail Ching-Liang Low identifies Homi Bhabha’s influence on her project as she attempts to engage with the power of “myth-making” in imperialist texts (Low 2). Low writes, “I begin this book with a

quotation from Bhabha because his works presents a clear challenge to rethink—in a self-reflexive way—the whole politics and poetics of writing against the grain” (1). So it is with Bhabha and Low that I conclude, saying that I hope to have engaged in a reading against the grain in these colonial discourses produced by the talented and identifiably imperialistic author Flora Annie Steel. In following Bhabha’s method for investigating the formalistic disruptions of authority within a colonial text, I find a means for dismantling the politics behind Flora Annie Steel’s claims for English superiority and her divisive categorizing of East and West. This speaks to my persistent fascination with Steel and her colonial narratives; tracing the presence of hybridity in her work allows me to reevaluate and reinvestigate the colonial themes in these texts and in the culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Loomba references and summarizes Benita Parry’s and Abdul JanMohamed’s critiques as she incorporates them into her own. Loomba quotes Parry’s concern about theorists following Bhabha’s method and her criticism that they will “‘either erase the voice of the native or limit native resistance to the devices circumventing and interrogating colonial authority’” (170). In her final summation of Parry’s concerns, Loomba also includes JanMohamed’s corroborating concerns: “Parry’s third criticism is that emphasis on the hybridity of colonial discourse has the effect of obscuring what Fanon called the ‘murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists.’ Abul JanMohamed makes a related critique of the work of Homi Bhabha in particular, arguing that its notion of hybridity glosses over the economic and cultural plunder of the colonized and can therefore only be sustained by ‘circumvent[ing] entirely the dense history of the material conflict between Europeans and natives and . . . focus[ing] on colonial discourse as if it existed in a vacuum’” (171).

Teaming up again in *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism* (2000), edited by Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry, Loomba, JanMohamed and Parry repeat these and other concerns over the work being done in the field of postcolonial studies. In their Introduction, Chrisman and Parry review some of the current interventions postcolonial theorists are trying to make. In this collection of essays they represent an “advocacy of antagonistically lived, starkly dichotomized divide between colonized and colonizer as an alternative to what they see as Bhabha’s evacuation of subaltern agency through a model of colonial hybridity grounded in the enunciative instability of textual pronouncements”

(17). See also Chapter 1 Note 3 for a gloss of Robert Young's critique of Bhabha's theories and use of hybridity.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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