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THE MANIPULATION OF MOWGLI

Performing Youth, Deconstructing Racialization, and Tracing Imperialism in *The Jungle Book*

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In Britain, the Christmas show is a longstanding tradition involving nearly all British theatre houses. National, regional, and local theatres deliver retellings of children's fables and other popular stories at Christmastime, resulting in a proliferation of year-end productions and pantomimes that often incorporate daytime performances for schoolchildren. This tradition is popularly understood as youth-oriented, constituting "slapstick" and "spectacle," such that its potential for subversion and cultural critique remains underexamined in theatre studies (Richards 2020). Furthermore, critiquing the Christmas show tradition in light of British imperialism, racisms, and intergenerational stereotyping is a similarly distant possibility. I strive toward that possibility in this chapter, working to highlight how socio-political narratives around British youthness, racism, and imperialism directly, problematically, and confusingly shape the formation of a taken-for-granted British cultural tradition. As shown by the Brexit vote, the nativist politics of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and the resurgence of British transoceanic military ambitions through the AUKUS pact (Sabbagh 2021), domestic British sentiment has a direct impact on the choreography of its racialized and neo-imperial global actions. Because of its cultural embeddedness within British society, the Christmas show is a crucial point of departure from which to examine the narratives that underpin Britain's national politics and their troubling historical and contemporary relationship to the wider world.

Through examining my own experience as part of the devising and performing ensemble for the Christmas show *The Jungle Book* in Liverpool from 2017–18, I put the development and performance of the piece in conversation with important themes from contemporary British society. Much of this analysis revolves around the positioning and relationality of the main character, Mowgli, whom I embodied. My argument is this: in manipulating Mowgli, the performative and creative work that my colleagues and I undertook during *The Jungle Book* simultaneously constituted confusing, thoughtful, and problematic (re)presentations of British youthness, race politics, and imperialism. These three aspects of the performance are complex on their own, and I further argue that the way in which they played out reinforce outdated, inaccurate, and damaging narratives about youth as resistant, whiteness as a blank slate, and British imperialism as a good time. All these narratives must be understood in

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the context of the type of audience to which this show was performed: a majority white, working-class audience of children, which also included a significant minority of children of color. For the children of color in the audience, my particular representation of Mowgli and his domestication at the hands of white cast members embodying various other characters constituted a harmful visual. This visual is pervasive, and troublingly maps onto sentiments held by British children of color more generally: that "stories have to be about white people" (Chetty 2016:96).

In what follows, I write against this assumption, but also unpack the problematic ways in which whiteness continued to be centered even in a story that is purportedly about a young Brown boy. I do so over the course of four main sections, at times autoethnographically and at times documentarily.[1] First, I present a narrative of development that describes the production of *The Jungle Book* that I was involved in, orienting the reader toward some of the issues I address later on. Second, I consider the possibility of performing youth from the perspective of an adult, drawing on anthropological perspectives that trouble mainstay assumptions about youthness. Third, I move to a consideration of the racialized nature of this production, in terms of casting, particular scenes, and the simultaneously hybridized and liminal nature of Mowgli as a "man-cub." Finally, I trace the imperialisms that are evident in *The Jungle Book*, drawing on both the original text that we used as inspiration and the performance itself. Put together, these sections position the development and performance of *The Jungle Book* as a complex representation of British dynamics of youthness, race, and coloniality, particularly in terms of the nexus of the liminality of youth and the racialized hybrid of animal-man-Other that Mowgli represents. In so doing, I offer a distinct lens into Britain's dangerous and ongoing adultist, racist, and imperial commitments.

Development and Performance

The Jungle Book was developed over the summer and autumn of 2017, followed by a 6-week run in winter 2017–18 as one among many Christmas shows in Liverpool. A longstanding partnership between children's theatre company Action Transport Theatre of Ellesmere Port and Unity Theatre of Liverpool, both of which are National Portfolio Organizations[2] for Arts Council England (Arts Council England 2020), the Christmas show at the Unity is an annual production devised by an ensemble that is auditioned and hired by Action Transport. Historically, Action Transport has chosen to work with Western fairy tales, prioritizing visual storytelling, comedy, and original music. For example, prior to *The Jungle Book*, Christmas shows developed through this partnership included *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *Little Red and the Big Bad Wolf* (Action Transport 2020a). Moreover, the Unity has a partnership with the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), and set designers for Action Transport's Christmas shows are often LIPA students. Indeed, this was the case with Sascha Gilmour, who both set- and costume-designed *The Jungle Book*.

The Jungle Book began without a script in hand, for it was a devised production. This technique – which involves significant input from performers, designers, and other members of a production's creative team – is often used to create original work, particularly because it is characterized by a kind of formal "openness" (Lipkin 2016:255) that tends to result in "multiple layers and narrations" of inspiration, story, and approach (Heddon and Milling 2005:221–222). Our process used as its source of inspiration a set of children's stories written by British imperialist author Rudyard Kipling in 1894 (Kipling 1910), which he titled *The Jungle Book*. Though this source material has been adapted into numerous forms, including the famous animated Disney movie and multiple live-action films, Action Transport's

production intended to eschew these, despite writer Kevin Dyer's belief that the Disney version in particular was "brilliant." Working alongside director Nina Hajiyianni, Dyer encouraged all members of the ensemble to draw more on Kipling's stories themselves rather than the overpowering archetypes associated with *Jungle Book* characters that Disney popularized, including Baloo the bear, Bagheera the panther, Shere Khan the tiger, and Mowgli the man-cub.

Such encouragement was particularly evident across the earliest parts of the devising process, including the two-part group audition that I was invited to and the initial research and development days that occurred once other cast members and I were offered roles. At the group audition in August 2017, all attendees were split into two groups of approximately 12 people each, of which 16 advanced to the callback rehearsal. Of those 16, perhaps 4 were people of color, despite the show's casting call indicating that Action Transport was "particularly interested in hearing from BAME [Black, Asian, and minority ethnic] practitioners" (Action Transport Theatre 2017). One exercise, for instance, put me to work with another performer of color, to co-create a moment between me embodying Mowgli and him embodying Shere Khan. Dyer encouraged us to think outside the box, so we created a moment of reconciliation where both Mowgli and Shere Khan sang a sad song of their shared misfortune as outcasts in the jungle, running counter to Kipling's original stories. When we presented our moment, Dyer rolled his eyes and Hajiyianni quickly moved to the next pair of auditionees.

After passing through the audition and being offered the role of Mowgli, three research and development days in September 2017 exemplified Action Transport's interest in visual storytelling. Here, Hajiyianni's directorial brilliance was on display, pushing myself and fellow devisers Fionnula Dorrity as Bagheera, Samuel Pérez Durán as Shere Khan, and Joe Shipman as Baloo – I was the only performer of color within the group[3] – to create a landscape for puppets to traverse when being chased by Shere Khan. It was also in these sessions that Dorrity and I came to an understanding of how Kaa the snake would be embodied. Dyer and Hajiyianni were initially not in favor of including a scene with Kaa, out of concern for detracting from how awe-inspiring they hoped to make Shere Khan. And even though we as the ensemble experimented with Kaa in a way that rendered the snake as an enormous puppet in the final production, directorial concerns about Kaa were borne out. At least one reviewer of the show remarked that while puppetry worked well in the case of the "sinister Kaa," Shere Khan does not "look as fierce some [*sic*] as he sounds and acts" because he is "hampered by an enormous cartoon-like head, almost like advertising breakfast cereal" (Baldock 2017).

Limitations were clear in other respects, both during the September convening and once full rehearsals started in November 2017. At the time, my approach to devising was one in which possibilities were endless, a sentiment I voiced at one session in response to Dyer's insistence on sticking within the general outline of Kipling's stories. My statement that "we can do whatever we want because Kipling just made all that shit up anyway" was met with derision and dismissal, perhaps because of the pressures to produce the exact show that had been contracted with the Unity, the need to hold onto some structure amid the uncertainty of devising, or both. At another moment, in attempting to capture the excitable energy of Baloo and Mowgli eluding Kaa and the monkeys, I embodied Mowgli by running around the playing space while breathlessly yelling nonsense phrases about escaping from monkeys, speaking the language of snakes, and outsmarting Kaa. Dyer captured these and made them more succinct, before instructing me to try again and read the lines in a certain way. Still experimenting, I neglected to read his lines word for word, leading to an admonition from

him: "can you please just say what I've written?" Through this tension of my experimentation and his authority as the writer, this moment eventually manifested as Mowgli and Baloo running from one corner of the stage to the other:

Mowgli and Baloo are running.
When they stop they are exhausted. But Mowgli is also exhilarated!
Mowgli: Yeehaaaa! The monkeys got me and they dressed up and stole clothes and they wanted and I said can't and then my arms and I said Aaaargh and then I spoke snake, Hisssss! And then the big snake coily coily coily and then she was gonna eat me.
He laughs at the adventure.

As a performer, this language enabled me to embody Mowgli's range of emotions, oscillating between elation and terror.

Even if moments of disagreement with Dyer and others while devising were tense, such creative limitations were also advantageous at times. Constructing our performance of *The Jungle Book* as occurring within the frame of an actual book yielded an important staging device that assisted the audience in transitioning from our pre-show, out-of-character interactions to the opening of the show, which included a sequence about where "the [physical] book" of *The Jungle Book* was. This framing also provided "chapter" headings that ensemble members changed throughout the show. Embedded into the set as signs that Gilmour and her team created, the headings brought the audience along, inducing anticipation or another emotion depending on the sign in place. Other limitations included knowing that this was a children's show designed for a Christmastime audience, meaning that jokes and lightheartedness were essential and expected. The earliest sequence between Baloo and Mowgli, for instance, sees Baloo throw berries at Mowgli to lighten the mood after the wolves leave Mowgli in Baloo and Bagheera's care, offering young audience members the "he's right behind you!" moment for which Christmas pantomimes in Britain are known. In that same sequence, Baloo recites a series of jokes to Mowgli about different kinds of trees, including a T-tree, which is a tree shaped like the letter T, a Christmas tree, and a family tree. These jokes were workshopped with children who were involved in the Unity's youth drama programs before being included in the final performance. Audience interaction was furthered when the monkeys leapt into the audience and stole both planted and actual objects from the crowd, ultimately requiring audience members to come onstage and retrieve their item by becoming monkey-like, before the monkeys would continue the show.

A final relevant insight on embodying youth is one that Hajiyianni, perhaps unintentionally, offered before the show's first full tech run in late November 2017. Up to that point, given the devising back and forth in which Dyer often asserted his privilege as writer, I had become less energized than perhaps the creative team was hoping for. So, before this full run, Hajiyianni gave me a single note: "be more like a kid." I unpack this note in more detail in the section on "Performing Youth," but I took this to mean injecting my performance of Mowgli with more energy, dynamism, and unpredictability. In following that direction, after completing the run, Hajiyianni was enthusiastic about the changes I had made, and Shipman remarked: "I saw a whole new side to Mowgli that I hadn't seen before." The degree to which youthness was performed through this stage direction, ahead of delivering a Christmas show to numerous audiences of schoolchildren and families from across England's north, is the subject of the next section. In staging youthness for young people, *The Jungle*

Book engaged complex dynamics of age and development that also manifested via racialization and imperialism.

Performing Youth

In this section, I address stereotypes of youthness as they relate to my performance of Mowgli and the wider development of Mowgli as a character. I use as my point of departure the actor's note that Hajiyianni gave me at the conclusion of tech week regarding performing Mowgli: that I should "be more like a kid" – that is, more energetic, feisty, and resistant. This particular note conjures up a whole series of stereotypes regarding youth and is specifically embedded in ways in which youthness is imagined. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall and criminologist Tony Jefferson, founders of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, have been instrumental in forwarding such an imagining, given that they view youth through the Marxist lens of class-based dynamics. In Hall and Jefferson's (2006) landmark work about British youth, *Resistance Through Rituals*, the text's subtitle – "Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain" – highlights the authors' position: that British young people are always ever fighting against structures and resisting hegemonies imposed upon them by adulthood and adult society. Hall and Jefferson make this claim by examining a number of subcultural practices, such as music and fashion choices related to punk and rock and roll, undertaken by British youth in the early 70s; the original text was published in 1975. Hall and Jefferson argue that these practices simulated social rebellion in order to counter – as one pair of reviewers of the 2006 edition of the text has put it – "the exploitation of the working week and the dullness of mainstream adulthood" (Winlow and Hall 2007:395). Through their argument, Hall and Jefferson emphasize counter-capitalist efforts at the generational margins of British society, thereby drawing out British youth's various meaning-making practices and offering robust examples of class-based cultural resistance.

Of course, the existence of a class-based cultural phenomenon of resistance undertaken by British youth does not necessarily mean that British youth are categorically and always resistant in and of themselves. Nonetheless, the notion of youth-as-resistant became ensconced in the British social sciences – and, indeed, wider British society – after Hall and Jefferson's intervention. Hajiyianni's interest in me having more childlike behavior when performing Mowgli drew on this legacy. Though her note did open up interesting possibilities for how Mowgli was performed, there is an issue with this somewhat one-dimensional approach to youth. Indeed, Hall and Jefferson have been criticized by other members of the Birmingham school for eliding examination of social categories like ethnicity, race, gender, and religion (Maira 1999). Such criticisms point to a need to respect "the capacity of juveniles to be active agents creatively shaping their environment" who are also contending with the "legal, political, economic, and social constraints imposed on them by virtue of their age and liminal status" (Amit 2001:16659). In asking me to be more kid-like, Hajiyianni was not actually asking for me to be more generically kid-like. Rather, she was asking me to perform *a specific type of youthness* – energetic, emotionally unstable, and resistant to adult society – that has come to be associated with young people in both academia and popular culture.

In some ways, this worked. Reviewers, for instance, characterized my performance of Mowgli as offering audiences "as intrepid a hero as you could wish for, strong headed, yet compassionate" (Baldock 2017). Here, the go-getter attitude of Mowgli matched what audiences and critics hoped to see when a young person was embodied on stage. Theatre often shows us less what is possible and more what we believe to be true. It reflects us back to ourselves; so too with Mowgli. In Action Transport's production, Mowgli's resistance to

Baloo and Bagheera – his parental figures – was seeded in the fact that Mowgli had to learn "the rules of the jungle" from Baloo before he could transition from being a "kid" to being a fully-fledged adult member of the jungle's society. This in-between stage is confirmed by Mowgli's nickname, "man-cub,"[4] which rendered him an individual who is simultaneously all grown up yet still learning. Youthness, in Action Transport's *The Jungle Book*, is a liminal stage of life in which young people are on their way to becoming socially finished products as adults.

As a consequence of understanding Mowgli as a youth who was still learning, the creative team emphasized emotional extremes. One microcosm of Mowgli's emotional rollercoaster comes after Mowgli and Baloo escape from Kaa, a segment of the production referenced earlier. Mowgli rides the high of the escape while Baloo has to bring him down to earth. Mowgli then grows insolent at Baloo's dose of reality, dismissing him in an enraged huff by calling Baloo "nothing but a stupid old pathetic useless bear" who is unwanted and unneeded. Mowgli's youthful arrogance fits the stereotype of youth discussed earlier, and in order to make those lines convincing, I delivered them with significant venom, at times earning gasps of shock and comments like "that's so mean" from the audience. Upon Baloo's departure, Mowgli transitions from bravado to fear at being alone, trying to amp himself up by displaying his knowledge of the jungle to anyone who will listen. However, Mowgli's insolence towards his mentor is marked as a learning moment for which he apologizes later on in the show, neatly mapping onto the narrative of young people as incomplete adults.

A similar moment of emotional extremes comes in Mowgli's interactions with the monkeys earlier in the show. While Baloo and Bagheera are arguing over the best approach to take when mentoring Mowgli – light-hearted laughter and fun, or disciplined control and regulation – Mowgli follows one of the monkeys to the monkey king's palace. Upon arrival, Mowgli is at first entertained by the monkeys and their song. However, when they jump into the audience and steal the audience's belongings, he begins to understand their potential for mayhem and becomes the voice of reason, insisting that they return what they have stolen. This is furthered when he realizes that he has not followed the monkeys out of his own free will, but rather has been lured there on the monkey king's orders because the monkey king wants to learn the powerful secret of fire, characterized throughout the show as the "red flower." Only man has access to this secret. The monkeys, aspiring to be human adults – another manifestation of the youth-as-unfinished narrative – seek that secret from Mowgli. Mowgli, unfinished himself, hasn't yet learned the secret of the "red flower" and is about to be torn limb from limb by the monkeys when he summons snakes to scare them away, one of whom is Kaa. Indeed, Mowgli's purportedly adult unfinishedness continually leads him into danger.

Yet, contemporary scholars theorizing youth counter an understanding of youth as incomplete. For example, anthropologists Adeline Masquelier and Benjamin Soares argue that youth is "an indefinitely expandable life stage," as opposed to a social category that constitutes "the transitional phase leading to adulthood" (2016:18), such that the dynamic positioning of youth "within larger social bodies and social formations" must remain central to analyses (2016:2). In other words, Masquelier and Soares seek to consider youthness on its own terms, rather than defining it vis-à-vis adulthood. Anthropologist Deborah Durham puts this another way, arguing that the category of youth is a "social shifter" that is dependent on particular circumstances, wider social structures, and relationalities (2004). Based on ethnographic work in Botswana, Durham finds that, relationally, some men who are nearly 50 years old are still socially considered to be youth because of the deferential behavior they must display relative to their elders, even while they present differentiated socio-political

views. In the characterizations of youth articulated by Durham as well as Masquelier and Soares, youth are co-creating their circumstances rather than solely responding to what adulthood presents to them. Indeed, Mowgli did not simply succumb to the demands of the monkeys, but rather put himself in trouble by thinking of snakes and – unintentionally – summoning Kaa. In light of how Mowgli was conceptualized by Action Transport's *The Jungle Book* and in line with what these anthropologists argue, youth is a much more complex category than it first appears.

All of this is to confirm a comment that Shipman made towards the end of our time working together. In casual conversation when I asked what he thought of the show, he replied that it had been a great experience to work on, but that he was disappointed with Mowgli. Relative to other shows that Action Transport had developed – including *Little Red*, which he had recently seen because it was being remounted in Manchester at the same time as our production in Liverpool – Shipman thought that Mowgli was "underdeveloped" as a character. Mowgli's nuances of motivation and complex identity were reduced, in Shipman's view, to responsiveness and reactiveness. Shipman believed that Mowgli was simply being dragged along by the energy of the circumstances, rather than wrestling with his own internal demons. Mowgli's song, "Human Thing," which I discuss later, was mentioned as a notable exception. From Shipman's analysis – which at least one reviewer (Gaskin 2017) and I both agreed with – and in light of the stereotypical narratives around youth that I have described, it is clear that the challenges of performing youth in a non-stereotypical way remain high, even for a youth-focused theatre company that "do[es]n't believe that children are the future" but rather that "they are the now, the present" (Action Transport 2020b). Action Transport's reference to the nowness of youth attempts to counter the deferred reward of fully-realized young people who have become adults, even while staging *The Jungle Book* in a way that upheld Mowgli as an incomplete – and racialized, as I discuss in the next section – "man-cub."

Deconstructing Racialization

In this section, I consider the term "man-cub," which makes its presence known throughout *The Jungle Book*. Mowgli, as a young boy who was raised by wolves, is the only one in the jungle to have this liminal title. His in-between status – both liminal, because he sits awkwardly between humanness and animalness; and hybrid, because he bears a hyphenated nickname that simultaneously aligns him with both the animal and human worlds – is a consequence of his birth family losing him in a tiger attack when he was a baby. In the opening action sequence of Action Transport's production, the audience is introduced to this dynamic when Mowgli is shown with his adoptive wolf family. Mowgli's wolf parents argue about what they should do, since Shere Khan remains relentless in his pursuit of the boy. They ultimately decide to entrust Mowgli to Baloo and Bagheera. Mowgli is thus transferred from one set of foster parents to another. Scholars have noted that family dynamics of mobility and adoption are constant themes in Kipling's work, mirroring the author's own experience as a child (Ricketts 1999).

However, I want to address the term "man-cub" in a different light: that of taxonomic racialization. The term "man-cub" is both a hybrid and liminal identity, from two different classes of things. That is, the first half comes from human society and the second half comes from animal society. Putting them together constitutes an ambivalence, confusion, and uncertainty, bridged by a hyphen that – drawing on performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood's description of hyphens – "brings self and other together even while it holds

them apart" (1985:9). Indeed, the term "man-cub" attempts to unify two separate taxonomies: human and animal. Mowgli's simultaneously liminal and hybrid position means that he is racialized as human by the jungle's animals and as animal by the nearby human villagers, even while both communities expect him to be fluent in their own social politics and norms. Whereas a term like 'African American' arguably brings identities together more easily because both sides of the hyphen constitute racial or ethnonational terms that are socially constructed, the term "man-cub" attempts to bridge two fundamentally different biologies, which I now consider from both the jungle animals' and the human villagers' positions.

Mowgli's identity crisis is baked into how he is described by the animals of the jungle. This crisis is multifaceted. First, it is generational: "man" represents adulthood while "cub" represents youth. Second, it is racialized: "man" comes from human society while "cub" comes from animal society. And third, it is structural: "man" has rules while the "cub" can roam free and play. Mowgli's constant desire to fit in is a struggle that is named in his racialized, hybrid identity. Dyer scripted as much in the scene with Kaa, baldly laying out Mowgli's attempts at finding a home:

Kaa: Ssso, what are you doing ssso far from home?
Mowgli: The jungle is my home.
Kaa: But you are a man-cub, man-cub.
Mowgli: Actually I'm a wolf.
Kaa: Don't look like a wolf to me. No tail, no wolf-earsss, not much fur.
Mowgli: Well, I was a wolf, and I still want to be a wolf. I enjoyed being a monkey for a few minutes but I don't like monkeys anymore; maybe I'll be a bear.
Kaa: Why don't you be a sssnake?
Mowgli: Well, I can talk sssnake . . .

The inflection that I was directed to provide in the line "maybe I'll be a bear" emphasized an incomplete line of thought, in which Mowgli again raises his unfinished identity, but this time in terms of an animal racialization.

As Kaa argues, Mowgli's physical characteristics are also at odds with his desire to fit in with the animal world. Music director Angus McLeod confirmed this conundrum when scripting Mowgli's one solo song, "Human Thing," with this opening verse:

> Where is my fur?
> Where is my grrrrr?
> I am a human thing
> I can't do anything.

Here, part of what would make Mowgli fit in is a set of animal characteristics – "fur" and a "grrrrr" – that he does not possess. In the world of the jungle, this lack makes him a "human thing" whose helplessness means he "can't do anything." Despite his wolfish aspirations, the song reveals him to be frail and fragile, largely because of his racial incompleteness as an animal.

A further moment of racial confusion is evident when Mowgli goes to the village, which constitutes Baloo and Bagheera's last-gasp solution to keep him safe from Shere Khan. As Mowgli enters, he is immediately accosted by the men of the village who see him as an animal and thus as a threat. A woman, played by Dorrity, sees that Mowgli is actually a "boy" – the first time he is referred to as such throughout the play – and attempts to teach him the ways of human society. He learns some words for human items like bowls and beds,

is taught to drink water using his hands, and experiments with sitting on a stool. The entire scene is fraught with the tension of being in an unfamiliar place and being asked to take on unfamiliar customs, all of which are racially at odds with how Mowgli has grown up. The figure of the village woman constitutes an entirely new foster parent, who brings with her a completely foreign culture that is then foisted upon Mowgli. Even the lighting state echoes this dynamic, changing from the cool blues and greens of the jungle to the warm reds and oranges of village domesticity.

As he struggles to settle in, Mowgli's racialized identity conflict – here in terms of him not being quite human enough – again comes to the fore. A lighthearted rat scurries into the village at night, and he and Mowgli begin playing. The woman wakes up to find Mowgli asking the rat about Baloo and Bagheera's welfare, reconnecting with his routes – or are they his roots? – to the village. But before long, the woman chases the rat away, calling it – and perhaps Mowgli – a "dirty, filthy thing," before adding that there can be "no animals in the house." Hearing this, Mowgli is alarmed and chooses to return to the jungle. As a consequence of the woman attempting to rid her house of animals, Mowgli acts against the news that he asks the rat to deliver to Baloo and Bagheera: that "I'm a human now." Instead, he turns his back on human society to return to the jungle. Ultimately, the question of Mowgli's racial identity is not resolved in intellectual but rather active terms, as Mowgli concludes the play by slaying Shere Khan with the "red flower." When Shere Khan ambushes him outside the village gates, Mowgli goes back into the village to steal the fire, which only man has access to. When the fight is over, Mowgli remains on stage as Baloo and Bagheera return to the jungle. My final task as Mowgli, before the other three cast members returned to the stage for a closing song, was to put up the final "chapter" title indicating "The End." If Mowgli ends the play as a human living in the jungle with respect for animals, this conclusion is neither easy nor neat, for it is clear that his body – racialized as human by the animals and as animal by the villagers – is at odds with his own experience of being both but definitively choosing neither.

But in human terms, there is one more racial problematic to attend to. *The Jungle Book* is set in – broadly speaking – the Indian jungle. Putting aside Kipling's animal confusion, in which he lumps together wolves and bears not normally found in Indian jungles into a fantastical and anthropomorphically flattened animal world, it is safe to assume that the village in the aforementioned jungle can also be construed as Indian. Yet this was not the case in Action Transport's version. First, in a general sense, the costumes used by the actors when in the village were not specifically of Indian origin. Rather, attire such as turbans, long coats, and billowing pants created an Orientalist image of the village through dress, ornamentation, and headgear, alongside scenes with a talking rat and a boy raised by wolves. Costumes in the village thus evoked a flattened world that equate the "East" with fantasy (Said 2003). Second, as mentioned earlier, I was the only cast member of color, so that an Indian village was embodied by white actors, at least one of whom – a white, northern-Irish woman – portrayed a villager attempting to teach a feral boy the ways of human society. Because that feral boy was embodied by me – a Brown, US-American[5] performer – Brownness ended up being disciplined and manipulated by whiteness. All of this was then performed to multiple audiences of north English schoolchildren, families, reviewers, and wider public audiences as a Christmas show.

In the village, whiteness continued to be problematically understood as a racially blank canvas, upon which any cultural form can be foisted. Indeed, as critical theorist Sara Ahmed has argued, "whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is hard not to see whiteness" (Ahmed quoted in Mohanram 2007:xiii). Ahmed also highlights

the wider difficulty of naming such an issue, writing that "the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible" (2004), affirming the well-documented concerns with purportedly colorblind casting in theatre that often results in minority actors being cast as and "playing stereotypes" (Daboo 2017:4). My role in *The Jungle Book* was one such stereotypical case. Taken alongside the imperial problematics of Kipling's writings, which I address in closing this chapter, it is troubling that the tired and racialized trope of the white body as a civilizing agent in Brown lands retains such significant staying power.

Tracing Imperialism

As a writer who supported British imperialism, Kipling's texts forward narratives of white supremacy and the white-savior complex. It is no surprise, then, that his imperialist position is evident in *The Jungle Book*. This is the case even though, as literary scholar Jopi Nyman recognizes, *The Jungle Book* has been relegated "to the category of children's fiction," such that the text's "constructions of nation, race, and class in colonial space, exposed through its narrations of local inhabitants (both animals and humans), have not attracted the attention that they deserve" (2001:205). In this final section, I trace these colonial formations, particularly in terms of how they manifest in the production of which I was a part.

Take, for instance, Mowgli's interactions with the idea of the rules of the jungle. Early on in Action Transport's production, when Bagheera catches Mowgli and Baloo playing rather than studying or training, Mowgli recites the rules of the jungle – referred to as the "Law of the Jungle" in Kipling's text (Nyman 2001:208) – to prove that he has learned much from Baloo. These "rules" relate to multiple important ideas, including sustenance, fear, man, killing, compassion, and the "red flower." A selection of Mowgli's recitation of these rules in Action Transport's production is depicted in Table 5.1.

These rules are followed by all in the jungle, with the exception of Kaa, the monkeys, and perhaps Shere Khan. While Kaa wants to kill Mowgli for pleasure, which directly contradicts the rule on killing, the monkeys seek to manipulate Mowgli into providing them with the "red flower" so that they can be more human-like, despite the rules indicating that fire is "Man's and Man's alone. No animal must have it because it brings destruction and death."

In pitting those who follow the rules against those who don't, Kipling positions animals in a good-versus-bad binary. This positioning stages a "conflict between orderly colonialism

Table 5.1

Principle	*Mowgli's Recitation of the Corresponding Rule*
sustenance/food	"Only eat what you need."
fear	"All animals are afraid of one other animal."
Man	"Man has cruelty in his heart. Keep away from him and do not welcome him into the jungle."
killing	"Kill or eat nothing for pleasure. Because only Man does that. Man is cruel and carries cruelty in his heart."
compassion/help	"Always help a wounded beast."
the "red flower"/fire	"[The red flower] Is Man's and Man's alone. No animal must have it because it brings destruction and death."

and anarchic nativism" in which "gendered and racialized categorizations" of animals relate to "moral judgments naturalized as virtues" (Nyman 2001:187). Such staging is evident in Action Transport's production of the text. When Mowgli is finally cornered by Shere Khan after escaping from the village, he employs two interrelated logics to convince Shere Khan of his innocence. First, when Shere Khan calls Mowgli "Man" instead of "man-cub" or some other hybrid variation, Mowgli immediately responds with: "I'm not. I'm animal. Like you." Then, to prove his animalness – and indeed, his attachment to the positive morality of Kipling's colonized jungle – Mowgli goes on to say: "I know the rules. Do not harm another animal, do not trust man, help a wounded animal. I know it all. I got 100 percent on my test." Shere Khan is unimpressed and attacks Mowgli. And though Shere Khan is treated as villainous for trying to kill Mowgli, there is an alternative framing to consider. Perhaps the tiger is attempting to protect the jungle by recognizing Mowgli's humanity and therefore seeking to rid the jungle of it. Indeed, the jungle and the human are incompatible. After all, as Action Transport's Mowgli knows from his memorization of the rules, "Man has cruelty in his heart. Keep away from him and do not welcome him into the jungle."

Nyman's analysis of Shere Khan's role is particularly interesting in this light, for it directly links the tiger's villainy to his anti-colonialist position. If – and here, I follow Nyman – colonial law can be mapped onto Kipling's Law of the Jungle, one tenet of which is to not kill Man because this attracts villagers' attention and could lead to violent reprisals, then Shere Khan is merely acting in the jungle's best interest by attempting to rid the jungle of Mowgli, who has no social ties to human society. But this position has rendered Shere Khan a villain in popular culture, largely because he does not follow the imperial "rules" of the jungle. That is, understanding Shere Khan as an anti-colonialist means recognizing that he wants to rid the jungle of any human and structuring – that is, white and colonial – influence. This affirms Kipling's good-native-versus-bad-native dynamic in reference to how the animals follow or ignore the colonial Law of the Jungle. Nyman's analysis is worth quoting in full:

> The good native acts like the wolf couple who adopt Mowgli and become [his] foster-parents . . . the bad native resembles the cunning tiger Shere Khan, whose man-eating can be seen as a form of forbidden anti-colonial native resistance deserving punishment. His attacks on Mowgli are then signs of opposition that endanger colonial authority, here not unambiguously represented by a small native boy, yet one who is not part of the people of the jungle but cognitively superior to them.
>
> *(2001:209)*

Underneath the pain that Shere Khan has suffered at Mowgli's hands, quite literally in terms of the scar that Mowgli gave him, it is possible to read a deep respect and love for one's own place, space, and land remaining free of colonial influence. The fact that this anti-colonial rhetoric has been rendered villainous in contemporary analyses and productions of *The Jungle Book* troublingly demonstrates the continued power of Kipling's – and Britain's – imperial legacy.

In Action Transport's production, the jungle's rule about Man – that "Man has cruelty in his heart" – is evidenced when the village woman chases away the rat that Mowgli befriends. But the second part of that rule – that Man is not welcome in the jungle – relates to different styles of authoritarian and imperial rule-making. For example, Bagheera makes clear that while the rules of the jungle are absolute, they are not always or equally applicable to Mowgli because of his racially hybrid and liminal position. When taken to the walls of the village, Mowgli cites the notion of Man's cruelty as a feeble attempt to stay in the jungle. In response, Dyer's Bagheera makes a previously unheard-of distinction: "That is a rule for us, not for

you, man-cub." Mowgli inhabits a liminal space, one that is simultaneously governed and ungoverned by colonial logics. Thus, the "man-cub" must learn an entirely new set of rules and behaviors from the villagers, which was concretized in Action Transport's production as a song called "We Make the Rules." Opening the play's second act, McLeod scripted lyrics about how the villagers have rules for grooming, eating, cleanliness, and so on, as well as how certain equipment such as bowls and stools were to be used in certain ways. Mowgli experiences these when the village woman tries to teach him how to properly "sit," "drink," and be "careful" near fire. But whereas the rules of the jungle were differently applicable to Mowgli because of his "man-cub" status that is simultaneously native and imperial, for him to be deemed fully human, there is no possibility of variation. Instead, he must sleep in a bed and stay clean – among other internalized behaviors – if he is to be part of the society of Man.

Embodied within this differentiated applicability of rules is Britain's imperialist civilizing mission in colonial India, coming out of Kipling's obsession with the white man's burden to control and subdue the Brown man particularly and the Indian subcontinent more widely. The village, as a space removed from the purportedly native anarchy of the jungle, is shown to be a civil place imbued with particularly Eurocentric assumptions of domesticity. This is despite the village itself being set in India, where, at a minimum, ways of sitting – such as on the floor, cross-legged, or in other formations that are less linked to keeping one's back straight as a colonially disciplined body – manifest differently than in Britain. Through Action Transport's village, there is evidence of theatre practitioner Augusto Boal's ideas (2008), as summarized by theatre scholar Kelly Howe: "the body is of course disciplined by all the institutions it touches – and that touch it" (2019:79). Attempts to discipline Mowgli's body in the village, which occur in terms of the imperialist structures and strictures that Kipling articulates in *The Jungle Book*, demonstrate critical theorist bell hooks' argument: that "white supremacy has divided us along the lines of bodies – black and brown bodies [that are] exploited, oppressed, and dominated by white bodies" ("Strike! Rise! Dance!," 2014). Indeed, in the visual that audiences of Action Transport's *Jungle Book* see during the village scene, my Brown body as Mowgli is disciplined by Dorrity's white body as the village woman, in order to humanize my character's – or perhaps what are read as my own – animalistic tendencies. This idea is also evident elsewhere: Baloo, Bagheera, and Mowgli's wolf parents are all played by white actors.

Here, then, is the concluding point. The subtle narration of this domineering storyline – of whiteness dominating and disciplining Brownness – is problematic in general, but particularly so given the environs of Action Transport's production. Performed in Liverpool – which was a major slave-trading port during the chattel slavery years of the transatlantic slave trade (Snorton 2017:84–85) – to a collective audience of thousands of primarily British schoolchildren from mostly white backgrounds, but also numerous other racial and ethnic heritages, the imperial undertones of the play surfaced through the colonial rules of the jungle combining with the physical symbolism of my Brown body being disciplined by white ones. Together, these factors helped create a jarring neo-imperial children's theatre production, in a story that is not often read as such. *The Jungle Book* is not entirely a story of intrepid heroism, and it is not exactly a story of good triumphing over evil. Rather, it is a story of *a particular and specific type* of morality – that of colonial control and hierarchy – triumphing over a particular and specific type of anarchy perceived as native. This narrative reinforces the British imperial logics of indirect colonial rule by overlaying a specific type of colonial perspective atop a world deemed in need of a particular kind of civilizing. And in the particular place of Liverpool, with the specific audiences that witnessed Action Transport's production, these themes become that much starker and more concerning for their staying power, repetitiveness, and echo of Britain's imperial past and neo-imperial present.

Closing

As a set of stories, *The Jungle Book* appears innocent. Indeed, what could be more harmless than animals in their natural habitat, raising and interacting with a boy who is – at times – one of their own? Yet, the development and performance of *The Jungle Book* as a Christmas-time theatre production for British schoolchildren raises a whole host of issues, namely in terms of the nexus of the liminality of youth and the racialized hybrid of animal-man-Other, and more widely in terms of generational, racial, and imperial problematics. Echoing recent calls to decolonize theatre and performance studies (Arora 2021; Bala 2017), my efforts here have been at showing how even the most purportedly unassuming stories retain the weaknesses and histories of the societies in which they are developed. This is all the more damning when read in the context of the problematic assumptions that many British educators have about the children they teach: that "children are colour-blind" and that they "do not attach significance to racialised identities . . . because we inhabit a post-racial world" (Chetty 2016:97).

When theatre is made for, about, or with youth – a dynamic that is particularly the case in the British Christmas show – it is a fallacy to assume that race or imperial histories are not a factor in children's experiences. In fact, the opposite is true. The stories we choose to tell our children and *how* we choose to tell them those stories are indicative of the particular biases, inflections, and issues that we face as a society. Staging a fantasy world where animals talk and boys are raised by wolves is all well and good, but only insofar as it allows us to re-imagine an alternative to the racial oppression and imperial legacy that Britain – and the contemporary West, more widely – continues to pride itself on. In that imagining, perhaps we can begin to move out of the racialized village and into a jungle unfettered by colonial influence. Only then, in casting off our narrativized shackles of imperial manipulation, will we all truly be free.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, I have described whether evidentiary quotes come from interactions with the creative and devising team or whether they are from documents that are not publicly available, such as now-expired casting calls and the show's final script. Wherever possible, I have endeavored to name the exact author of each quote, insofar as I am aware of who said or wrote what.

2 National Portfolio Organizations are organizations that Arts Council England defines as 'leaders in their areas, with a collective responsibility to protect and develop our national arts and cultural ecology' (Arts Council England, 2021:5). These organizations go through a competitive application process, develop a multi-year funding agreement and business plan, and are subjected to regular monitoring, evaluation, and reporting.

3 In the context of the United States, Pérez Durán would also be considered a performer of color because of his Hispanic background. However, in the UK, as a white performer from Spain, his racial background did not map onto that of discourse around people of color, but rather onto discourse around European identity and language diversity. Nonetheless, press coverage of the performance labeled us as an 'international cast' (Jones, 2017), directly drawing on Action Transport's geopolitical characterisation of the ensemble.

4 Below, I examine this term in more racialised and imperialist detail.

5 I use the term 'US-American' rather than 'American' to recognize the imperial way in which US identity discourse has deployed the term 'American' as a way of excluding the rest of the Americas, despite the indigeneity of numerous Native and First Peoples across the continent. This choice is in line with terminology deployed by other scholars of color, including anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016).

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