

Perceptions of Race in Three Generations of *The Jungle Book* by Anna Waterman

Abstract:

The recent theatrical adaptation of *The Jungle Book* resurfaced the ghosts of Kipling's story and Disney's adaptation, namely Kipling's controversial political views regarding colonialism, as well as the racial implications in Disney's *The Jungle Book*.

This past summer, an adaptation of the Disney classic *The Jungle Book* opened up for a stint on the theatrical stage. Director Mary Zimmerman has re-imagined the tale for The Boston Theater, drawing inspiration from both Kipling's original 1894 short story collection and the 1967 Disney animated feature film. Zimmerman decided to use songs from the Disney version and The Sherman Brothers' collection and also incorporates traditional Indian musical styles and choreography.^[i] When faced with the enormous challenge of recreating such an iconic American story, Zimmerman has also had to deal with Kipling's and Disney's controversial baggage. In an interview, Zimmerman was asked if the racial implications in *The Jungle Book* were a concern, which met with her flippant response: "Yeah, it was a concern. But I've decided to make it not a concern."^[ii] Zimmerman has quite a bit of problematic material to sidestep: Kipling's controversial political views regarding colonialism, for one, as well as the racial implications in Disney's *The Jungle Book*, particularly the character King Louie, who seems to some viewers to offer a racialized portrait of jazz culture that conflates "swingers" (presumably African American jazz musicians) with monkeys. Zimmerman has argued that although Kipling's colonizing mindset was undeniably retrograde, much of the exoticism and romanticism of the Indian jungle in his stories could be explained by the fact he was taken away from colonial India to be put in a strict, abusive English boarding house at the age of 6.^[iii] In regards to King Louie, Zimmerman asserts: "Look at the original—it's sung by [Italian American performer] Louis Prima. He's the King of Swingers. It's something I think where the racism is in the eye of the beholder."^[iv]

Zimmerman has been criticized for her dismissive attitude towards issues of colonialism and race, most notably by Silk Road Rising director Jamil Khoury in his online essay, "The Trouble With Mary."^[v] Khoury criticizes Zimmerman for her appropriation of colonized peoples and for what he takes to be a blindness to her own white, American privilege.^[vi] However, after meeting and discussing with Zimmerman, Khoury admits that he may have misunderstood her intentions.^[vii] Zimmerman's overarching goals, he learned, were to transcend histories of racism, put on a good show, and recreate the childhood sensation of absolute wonder.^[viii] That said, the question of how *The Jungle Book* could and should be transformed onto stage has resurfaced the ghosts of Kipling and Disney's stories into the public consciousness. The episode demonstrates how pertinent it is to examine *The Jungle Book* again, particularly Kipling's original descriptions of the Monkey-People and Disney's jived-up musical sequence, "I Wanna Be Like You," noting

how the language of race was used and/or performed in each rendition, and how this racialized performance has transformed throughout the three generations of *The Jungle Book*.

In Kipling's 1894 *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli's character appears in three of the tales: "Mowli's Brothers," "Kaa's Hunting," and "Tiger! Tiger!" In Kipling's version, Mowgli is raised by wolves until he is banished from their tribe because some of the pack fears his humanity. Mowgli goes to the man village and later is deemed a witch because of the skills he acquired from his time in the Jungle. As a result he is banished from human society as well. Mowgli is left to roam the jungle alone, recognizing that neither the animals nor the humans accept him. To some degree, it seems safe to assume that Mowgli's character was autobiographical for Kipling, who struggled with the multiplicity and ambiguity of his own identity as a British subject born in a colonial setting.

In "Mowgli's Song," Kipling laments Mowgli's, and perhaps his own, double-identity: "As Mang flies between the beasts and birds, so fly I between the village and the jungle... These two things fight together in me as the snakes fight in the spring... I am two Mowglis."^[ix] A similar language of split or multiple identity can be found in W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 theory of double-consciousness, the condition of being raised in a European/ American setting, but African by birth: "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."^[x] Thus, through Mowgli, Kipling addresses complex issues of race, place, and identity that had at least some roots in personal experience.

This hardly means Kipling was an unequivocal ally of colonized Indians, however. Aside from *The Jungle Book*, in fact, Kipling is most famous for his controversial views on colonialism. George Orwell even called him "the prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase."^[xi] Kipling succinctly outlines his outlook on colonization in his 1899 poem, "The White Man's Burden," which claims that it is England's duty (and burden) to colonize and civilize underdeveloped countries and peoples:

Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.^[xii]

In this section of the poem, Kipling describes the native people as "half-devil and half-child," implying that because they aren't of the Christian faith they are ignorant and therefore could not know any better. Thus, it is the duty of the more civilized, white man to educate and salvage these people. The poem can be interpreted ironically, but the popular consensus remains that Kipling was a firm supporter of British imperialism rooted in a sense of cultural supremacy.

These views surface most obviously in *The Jungle Book* when Kipling's character Baloo, Mowgli's mentor, describes "monkey people" who are both leaderless and disorderly:

I have taught thee [Mowgli] all the Law of the Jungle for all the peoples of the jungle—except the Monkey-Folk who live in the trees. They have no law. They are outcasts. They have no speech of their own, but use the stolen words, which they overhear when they listen, and peep, and wait up above in the branches. Their way is not our way. They are without leaders. They have no remembrance. They boast and chatter and pretend that they are a great people about to do great affairs in the jungle, but the falling of a nut turns their minds to laughter and all is forgotten. We of the jungle have no dealings with them. We do not drink where the monkeys drink; we do not go where the monkeys go; we do not hunt where they hunt; we do not die where they die.^[xiii]

Baloo deems these "Monkey-Folk" harshly as "outcasts," and thus deservedly segregated from the rest of the Jungle. They have no "law," "leaders," "speech," or "remembrance." Note that the monkeys are anthropomorphized as "Monkey Folk" or "Monkey People," rather than simply monkeys. Kipling secures the language of Jungle-Folk/Monkey-Folk, us/them, and insider/outsider, which both humanizes the monkeys and makes them into "others." Moreover, Kipling establishes a distinct hierarchy of species, described as the Jungle's "tribes" and "people." All of these features of his text seem to leave a door open to racial allegory that endorses Britain's colonization of India.

In 1967, Disney took a very loose interpretation of Kipling's stories, changing most of the plot and inventing new characters and subplots. In Disney's version, Baheera finds Mowgli in a basket in the river and brings him to a wolf family, who raises him as one of their own cubs. Upon the arrival of Shere Kahn, a man-hating tiger, the wolf pack decides that Mowgli must be taken to the man-village to ensure the pack's safety. Baheera accompanies Mowgli to the man village, along the way encountering a series of characters that deter them from their destination. By the end of the film, Mowgli uses fire to scare Shere Kahn away from the Jungle, and chooses of his own free will to go to the man village, following the romantic pursuits of a nameless Indian girl. The story becomes, then, a plot less about multiple identities or being caught between two cultures than a simple story about socialization as Mowgli matures from uncivilized childhood to appropriate adult participation in society.

The racial politics of Disney's animated film remain problematic, however, and have received scrutiny from several critics. In "It's A Jungle Book Out There, Kid," for example, Greg Metcalf, Art History and Archeology professor at the University of Maryland, argues that *The Jungle Book* addresses several cultural movements that Walt Disney (with his infamously conservative worldview) would have found threatening in the late 1960s.^[xiv] Disney uses exaggerated characterizations to represent each threat: liberal parenting (Baloo), women's liberation (lack of prominent female characters), homosexual activity (the sensual snake Kaa), rock 'n roll and the hippie movement (the cultures representing the Beatles), and the Civil Rights movement (King Louie and the monkeys).^[xv] At the conclusion, Metcalf argues, Disney's American ideal is realized when Mowgli willingly returns to the man-village, having demonstrated his superiority over the jungle animals through his mastery of fire, confirming that

everything and everyone has its respective place in society.^[xvi] This message starkly differs from Kipling's original, complex sense of multiple identities, which results in Mowgli's—and perhaps Kipling's—alienation, rather than a sense of belonging.^[xvii]

Another divergence of the Disney film from Kipling's original—in terms of how race and identity are portrayed—comes in the depiction of the Monkey-People. While Kipling explicitly describes the Monkey-People as leaderless, Disney invents the character of King Louie, the Monkey-People's jive-talking, scating, orangutan ruler. The character of King Louie proves historically inaccurate as well, as orangutans are nonexistent in India. In the Disney film, King Louie poses a minor threat to Mowgli: he wants to learn how to make fire so that he can be like a man. This could easily be interpreted through a racial lens; the monkeys could be depictions of Africans wanting to learn how to be “civilized” equals of the white man:

Now I'm the king of the swingers/Oh, the jungle VIP
I've reached the top and had to stop/ And that's what botherin' me
I wanna be a man, mancub/ And stroll right into town
And be just like the other men/ I'm tired of monkeyin' around!
Oh, oobee doo/ I wanna be like you
I wanna walk like you/ Talk like you, too
You'll see it's true/ An ape like me/ Can learn to be human too^[xviii]

The themes of imperialism—and of racial competition, mimicry, and assimilation—are really interesting and multiply layered here: although King Louie is royalty, he feels restricted that he is still not on the same level as humans. Perhaps this could be a commentary on how Europeans viewed native hierarchies and imperial systems as illegitimate. If Metcalf's reading holds weight, Louie's lyrics could also be read in the context of the Civil Rights Movement.

The conflation of monkeys and Africans has had a long-standing history within the United States, dating back at least to the antebellum period. In “‘Man Cannot Behold It Without Contemplating Himself’: Monkeys, Apes and Human Identity in the Early American Republic,” Brett Mizelle, professor of History at California State University, argues: “This recurring linkage between blacks and apes was used to reinforce Euro-American supremacy and ultimately to justify slavery; after all, as Keith Thomas has observed, ‘once perceived as beasts, people were liable to be treated accordingly.’”^[xix] Long after slavery was abolished, the association between apes and African-Americans persisted throughout popular culture. Throughout the early twentieth century, Africans and African-Americans in illustrations and cartoons were often given primate-like characteristics. For example, in the 1941 cartoon “Scrub Me Mama With a Boogie Beat,” the African-American citizens of Lazytown are depicted with monkey-like features: pronounced lips, rounded heads, and ears that visibly stick out.

Similarly, in the postcards from the early 1900s, the African-American caricature seems more primate than human.

With this tradition in mind, Disney's choice to portray Kipling's "Monkey-People" and their "silly songs" as "Swingers," was perhaps fueled by more than word play. African-Americans originated swing music, which was rooted in the traditions of slave songs, ragtime, and blues. Thus, the monkeys' music—catchy, danceable, and swingy—immediately associates them with (presumably African-American) swing musicians. Disney creates a new racial dynamic situated within a uniquely American context: while Kipling's racialization of the monkeys remains ambiguous, alluding chiefly to native peoples of India, Disney associates the monkeys with an identifiable American people. The name King Louie even refers to a specific individual, Louis Armstrong, the King of Swing. Originally, the producers of Disney's "The Jungle Book" wanted to cast Armstrong as King Louie; however, they anticipated controversy over a black man voicing an ape, and decided to cast Italian-American singer and trumpeter Louis Prima instead.^[xx]

As a result, this racially hyperconscious, though possibly still-racist hybrid performance winds up mirroring many of the key features in the history of minstrelsy. Essentially, a white man (though Italians have faced their own racist challenges in America), who is imitating black jazz vocalists (especially Louis Armstrong), sings a song in character as an orangutan king who wants to be human. There are inherently multiple levels of meaning in this performance, which the Disney production would hope to wish away but have nevertheless been transmitted to generations of America's youth.

To return to our modern day, when casting the role of King Louie, Zimmerman was placed in the same position as the Disney producers were in 1967. Zimmerman recalls the audition process for casting Andre de Shields as King Louis:

I asked him to come and actually audition for me—a thing he rarely does — and to come prepared to audition for the role he most would like to play of the three we talked about—and that turned out to be King Louie. He gave the single greatest audition I've seen in 25 years. Still, I debated with myself for eight days before offering him the role. But in the end, if I hadn't cast him, it would have been because he is African-American. That would have been the only reason—the fear of the past, of the historical discourse, of the stereotypes of the past.^[xxi]

Over thirty years after Disney's dilemma over whether or not to cast Louis Armstrong as King Louie, Zimmerman describes being faced with the same issue herself. Zimmerman's decision to cast de Shields—regardless of past stereotypes and controversies surrounding the role—marks a substantive shift in the way race is perceived, particularly in terms of performance and show business. While Disney producers shied away from casting a black man as an orangutan in order to avoid controversy, Zimmerman recognized that type of behavior as overtly discriminatory. Zimmerman knew de Shields was the right man for the role, regardless of and completely separate from race. If anything, de Shields being African-American gave his performance even more depth, and an opportunity to confront these cultural stigmas in a creative, positive, and

masterful way. Zimmerman reflects upon de Shields' performance: "I feel Andre's performance is really, really layered: a virtuoso display of theatrical artistry, ferocious, somewhat confrontational and 100% brilliant."^[xxii]

Andre de Shields, best known for playing *The Wiz* in the 1974 Broadway play of the same title, has had a rich, expansive career in which he has nonetheless had to confront American racial politics more than once. When asked in an interview whether he would skat in his role as King Louie, de Shields replied:

We gotta skat because I'm standing on the shoulders of the father of jazz and the innovator of skat, Louis Armstrong... it makes sense that he would be King Louie in the *Jungle Book* but there was a hint of backlash because of the supposed racial slur that that would have meant to have Louis Armstrong play an orangutan, so he was passed over for what I call the prince of jazz... I'm gonna skat, I'm gonna swing, I'm gonna sneak in a few impersonations of Louis Armstrong and I'm just gonna have a ball.^[xxiii]

The veiled question within "will you skat" seems to be "will you portray King Louie as depicted in the Disney films—that is, as an African-American swinger?" De Shields responds by restoring the memory of the true King of Swing, who was largely dismissed by Disney's casting choice. De Shield's optimistic and passionate statement, "I'm just gonna have a ball," encapsulates his ability to both acknowledge and transcend these racial histories, by giving it his all and simply having fun with it.

Importantly, de Shields sees his actions as going even further in exploding old stereotypes. In an article in the *New York Times*, de Shields reveals his broader intentions as a performing artist: "I've always said that part of my mission as a performing artist is a ministry to detonate stereotypes, to blow them up, so that we're no longer haunted by them."^[xxiv] Out of all three generations of *The Jungle Book*, Andre de Shields is the only participant who comes into direct contact with his own race's stereotypes. In some ways, de Shields has faced some of the same issues that African-American minstrels faced performing in blackface: how can a performer embody a stereotype without further affirming it in the public consciousness? De Shields' method seems to suggest a modern take on minstrelsy: by embracing and "blowing up" historical stereotypes he aims both to acknowledge the complex racial history of American entertainment and to highlight the stereotypes' absurdity, which may eventually render them obsolete.

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[i] Robert Weinert-Kendt, "Cutting Through a Cultural Thicket," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2013.

[ii] Catey Sullivan, "How Mary Zimmerman Handled Kipling's Racism and Misogyny in a New The Jungle Book Musical," *Chicago Magazine*, section goes here.

[iii] *ibid*

[iv] *ibid*

[v] Deanna Isaacs, "The Jungle Book Sets off Another Rumble," *The Chicago Reader*, July 8, 2013

[vi] *ibid*

[vii] *ibid*

[viii] *ibid*

[ix] Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (New York: Viking, 1996), 133.

[x] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1994)

[xi] George Orwell, "Rudyard Kipling," George Orwell, section goes here, accessed December 19, 2013, http://www.george-orwell.org/Rudyard_Kipling/0.html

[xii] Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," 1899

[xiii] Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (New York: Viking, 1996)

[xiv] Greg Metcalf, "'It's A Jungle Book Out There, Kid!': The Sixties in Walt Disney's 'The Jungle Book'" *Studies in Popular Culture* 14, no. 1 (1991)

[xv] *ibid*, 95

[xvi] *ibid*, 95

[xvii] *ibid*, 95

[xviii] *The Jungle Book* (Burbank, CA: Disney Home Video., 1967).

[xix] Brett Mizelle, "'Man Cannot Behold It Without Contemplating Himself': Monkeys, Apes and Human Identity in the Early American Republic," in *Explorations in Early American Culture*, by William Pencak and George W. Boudreau ([University Park, PA]: Pennsylvania Historical Association for the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, 1998), 163.

[xx] Robert Weinert-Kendt, "Cutting Through a Cultural Thicket," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2013.

[xxi] Deanna Isaacs, "'That Felt Wrong': Mary Zimmerman on *The Jungle Book* | Bleader | Chicago Reader," Chicago Reader

[xxii] *ibid*

[xxiii] Starrene Rhett Rocque, "Andre De Shields Stars in 'The Jungle Book'" *JET*, June 17, 2013.

[xxiv] Robert Weinert-Kendt, "Cutting Through a Cultural Thicket," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2013.

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