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- 2 On domestication and the co-evolution of humans and animals, see Haraway.

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The Imperial Boy as Prosthesis

DON RANDALL



THE NOTION of an empire on which the sun never sets was not original to British imperial culture; it was conceived in the mid-sixteenth century in relation to the earlier established Spanish empire of Charles I and, later, of his son Philip II. Mid-Victorian Britain gave the concept a new lease on life—already in 1861, Lord Salisbury used it familiarly in a complaint about colonial defence expenditures—and it became for several decades a slogan for popular understanding of Britain's imperial achievement and, most particularly, of the global expanse of the nation's territorial holdings (see Roberts). Revisiting now, however, the affirmation that "the sun never sets on the British Empire," I wonder if it does not speak of time as well as space, of duration as well as expansiveness. Does the phrase not suggest that Britain's empire will never come upon its waning moments, never witness the last light of its glorious day, never descend into oblivious darkness? The Victorian imperial project was not only to gain an expansive empire but also to retain it, to extend it in time beyond any foreseeable demise.

The will to gain time, to gain the promise of time, directs attention to the child. Although eighteenth-century Britain had already established childhood and the child as important modern sites of societal investment, the several decades of the Victorian age served to shape and consolidate the understanding of the child as a bearer of meanings—a symbol, an emblem—in whom one could read a society's character and stature, even its future. The child who

announces the future also consolidates selected aspects of the present and the past; the child is a site of negotiation for contingent times. A generation of children decides, by the cumulative force of the children's coming of age, what is to be retained of the productions of preceding generations—what achievements, what projects, what values, what ideals and aspirations. The child, called upon to innovate and renew, is also recruited as a bearer of legacies.

As a locus and bearer of particular social meanings, the child is not so much empowered as rendered instrumental. The reading of the child becomes the writing of the child; the message contained in the figure of the child becomes a discourse of the child and childhood. In this figurative, discursive deployment of the child, in this tacit recognition of the child's potential as instrument—the sense of all that the represented child, the child as figure, can be made to say and do—one can discover an enabling application of the prosthesis. To assure its extension in time, Victorian imperial culture makes prosthetic use of the figure of the child. And in this process, a clear preference is shown with respect to gender. The child-enabler of an enduring empire is a boy. Male authors create him; his cohorts are other boys (or men); he participates in masculine projects and undertakings. Some post-Victorian fictions—notably Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), and a few decades later, the adventure series of Enid Blyton—worked to turn attention to the possible roles of the girl in imperial representation, but such innovations clearly maintain a relationship with the original Victorian-boy prototype. In our own time, a globally successful embodiment of a female child-adventurer is to be found in Dora, of *Dora the Explorer*, but even Dora has her intrepid cousin and occasional companion Diego, who is a quite exact, if slightly updated, reproduction of the boy whom Victorian authors pressed into imperial service time and again. The Victorian legacy is thus legible in the *Dora* narratives; the Victorian imperial boy is submitted to both reproduction and derivation. The Victorian era had, however, uses for the boy-prosthesis that were culturally and historically specific.

The boy of Victorian imperial fiction is plucky; he is elected as the vigorously, exuberantly youthful representative of an empire that wants to be and remain young. In maturity lies the beginning of decay, and so the empire must be forever young—or at least repeatedly rejuvenated. In the imperial adventure fiction of the Victorian age, particularly the later Victorian age, one can discern a powerful urge to place the boy in the key moments, the inaugural moments, of imperial history. The boy who announces the imperial future, who announces that the empire will have a future, is thus already present in its past, already instrumental in the fashioning of its present. This is at times explicit, as in numerous novels of G.A. Henty that specify a relationship with meaningful historical moments: among others, *With Clive in India, Or the Beginnings of an Empire* (1884), *With Wolfe in Canada, Or the Winning of a Continent* (1894), and *By Sheer Pluck: A Tale of the Ashanti War* (1884). More commonly, the historical moment is implicit but nonetheless clear, as when we follow a boy's adventures in Kipling's *Kim*

(1901) and discover, with increasing clarity as the narrative progresses, that the historical location is the colonial India of the 1880s. The boy's repeated representation within imperial history allows him to give his particular stamp to all of the empire's times. He demonstrates that the imperial progress is a youthful procession, in all its moments. The boy who contains within him the future, as the seedling does the tree, is fully present also in the present, and even in the past. He represents an empire always vital and burgeoning, never yet at its apogee, and certainly not ever at the beginning of its decline.

A future end of empire can come about, however, not only by loss of vigour or of command or of dominions but by loss of self; one can lose one's soul in gaining a world. Imperial expansion entails encounter with difference, otherness, and if the imperial power undertakes to transform and assimilate the cultural others over which it gains ascendancy, it must also submit to transformation in turn. The Victorians—at least the later Victorians—were aware of this contingency, which has become a basic premise for post-imperial cultural studies, and the figure of the boy here again shows his usefulness. The boy in imperial adventure literature, a prosthesis for Victorian society's imperial aspirations, is often employed as a prosthesis by the adult male characters he encounters. The assumption at work here is that the boy (not yet fully formed socially and culturally) can negotiate difference, especially cultural difference, more effectively than the man. The boy as instrument can extend adult masculine power into various realms of difference. The recognition that the street-urchin Kim can extend British power into otherwise inaccessible areas of Indian society motivates his recruitment as a spy by Colonel Creighton. Forest Officer Gisborne, in Kipling's "In the Rukh," perceives in Mowgli a very similar special capacity, a power of access in relation to a native world that would otherwise be closed to British intervention. Henty's boys (though nothing like Kipling's imaginative sophistication enters into their conception) frequently have a talent for foreign languages and disguise, and are given, by their adult superiors, assignments requiring effective infiltration of suspect or hostile social worlds.

The figure of the boy cannot be simply a little man if he is to function as a prosthesis. The boy must be distinct, and yet he must fit; he must conform to the forms of masculinity to which he provides his service. As suggested previously, the boy, as child, embodies the promise of newness, of futurity, but he is also the bearer of legacies. For this reason, the boy protagonist of the middle and late Victorian period is very much a schooled boy. In 1856, Thomas Hughes compellingly inaugurates this link between the school and the plucky, spiritually "muscular" imperial boy. Tom Brown's precise relationship with imperial endeavour is not clearly resolved, but his best friend, Harry East, forthrightly goes to the East, to serve in the Indian empire. Four decades later, Kipling's principal schoolboy creation, Stalky, will follow East's lead, although he does so with his own idiosyncratic style. Even Kipling's more feral creations are carefully marked by schooling: Bagheera, Baloo, and Kaa take the schoolmaster's role in Mowgli's curiously formal jungle education; street-bred Kim

is made to put in his time at St. Xavier's. The boy-prosthesis is an instrument of innovation, but also of conformity.

Most fundamentally, the prosthesis converts a "can't do" into a "can do." If it is not always, in the strictest terms, a disability that the prosthesis corrects or compensates for, it is always at least a certain incapacity—for an action, a work, one wants or needs to perform, but which one can't accomplish without the supplementary equipment. Jacques Derrida's notion of the dangerously divided logic of the supplement certainly applies to the case of the imperial boy. In Derrida's rendering, the supplement first presents itself as something extra that can be added to that which is already complete; however, the supplement can only add itself to that which is in some way lacking, incomplete. Self-sufficiency and the supplement cannot inhabit the same place and time of being. The prosthesis as supplement cannot be approached from a position of strength; it is taken up because it fortifies a weakness or supplies a lack. Victorian Britain's venturesome, enterprising boy therefore points to popularly held, if unacknowledged, anxieties that the boy is called upon, repeatedly, to alleviate: perhaps the bright day of empire will not endure; perhaps the imperial enterprise will not prove able to understand and manage difference, nor to elude the transformative impact of difference upon individual identities and the "home" culture.

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