

Taming the Jungle: Adaptation and Appropriation

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One of the methods through which the British empire sought to exert control in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was through the collection and reassemblage of knowledge. This method of understanding other people and lands had little to do with the actual people and places they proposed to know and represent. Fiction, such as Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895), proposed to put on display the rich environmental and cultural history of India—Kipling went so far as to include a preface to *The Jungle Book* that identified the source of the Mowgli tales as “collected at various times and in various places from a multitude of informants,” most of which, on closer inspection, are actually animals, such as a “Hindu gentleman,” who is probably, based on his description, a langur.¹ This conflation of India's people and animals indicates something troubling yet unsurprising: Kipling's tales have little to do with the real people he proposed to represent, and far more to do with the voyeuristic British desire to understand their empire. Yet how does adaptation— often written outside of the imperial time periods and working to evade or trouble the question of imperial dominance— also participate in the process of shaping our understanding of people and places? I propose that we might view adaptations of nineteenth-century texts as a type of virtual tourism, one both at a remove and palimpsestically rooted in its imperial origins.

When authors like Rudyard Kipling are engaged by scholars, there is often a keen understanding of their participation in what I am calling virtual tourism. In my use of the term, I am referring to a deliberate manipulation of Othered people, places, and cultures in an ostensible attempt to simultaneously entertain and educate.² While the medium of film

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*. Ed. W. W. Robson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): xlv.

² See also Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Countless other writers or auteurs might be listed alongside Kipling, including (but not limited to): H. Rider Haggard, H.P. Lovecraft, Joseph Conrad, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and *many* more.

creates opportunities for people to move beyond the realm of fancy—to visualize accurately nations like India or Nigeria or Hong Kong—they also necessitate a close look at imperial practices in those same nations. Animated films like Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967) worked hard to bypass those imperial practices entirely, choosing to animate the jungle but largely limiting the reader's view of India. Mowgli's closest encounters with India are his capers at a jungle ruin and a brief encounter on the outskirts of a village. Even the animals of this adaptation are not indigenous to India, such as King Louie, an orangutan. Baloo, who is blue-grey for best visual contrast, also does not meet the descriptions of any of the bears indigenous to India. Yet the special features released alongside the adaptation's DVD-release heavily focus on the educational possibilities of the film: all of India's animals laid out for consumption. The animals stand in for the whole of India, somehow both representative of its educational possibilities and wholly inaccurate, even in the documentary-style special feature, which uses stock footage of animals that, yet again, are not Indian.

Virtual tourism of this sort works palimpsestically; the example of *The Jungle Book* (1967) shows a desire to educate, to provide answers, and to package knowledge palatably while simultaneously evading larger, important questions that might be important for a child audience to consider: why were the British in India? How did their presence affect colonial life? How does the implicit perspective of a British author frame the view of India that we are afforded?³ Adaptation works evolutionarily, providing two branches of development: evade these questions or confront them. In a time when many authors are rightly being challenged on their problematic worldviews, adaptation offers the opportunity to confront history by looking back and forward at the same time. For example, when Disney revisited *The Jungle Book* in 1994, they made efforts to cast the film with Indian actors, in India, and with Indian

³ Though Kipling was born in India and professed to love it, he left India for Britain at the age of five, not returning again until his twenties.

animals.⁴ More importantly, the conflict of this adaptation centers around the British Raj, with the character of Captain William Boone (Cary Elwes) as eager to rob Indians of their treasure as he is to kill its animals as trophies. Though far from perfect, it stands as an example of what happens when virtual tourism decides to confront, rather than evade, the ugliest parts of our historical past. Adaptations like this one, including HBO's *Lovecraft Country* (2020), countless Hogwarts slash fanfiction, and Stephanie Bolster's *White Stone: The Alice Poems* (1998), all take us on tours of worlds beloved especially by Western audiences while also giving those same audiences much-needed glimpses of reality.

⁴ This all comes with caveats: the part of Mowgli was performed by Jason Scott Lee, who is an American of Chinese and Hawaiian descent, thus flattening the most prominent Indian character in the story. An orangutan, regrettably, also makes a performance as King Louie.