SYMPOSIUM

The Imperial Superhero

Chris Gavaler, *Washington and Lee University*

Set in 1978, the year Edward Said published *Orientalism*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* depicts "magic children" born in the first hour of August 15, 1947, "within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India" (1981, 226, 224). Through some "freak of biology" or "preternatural power," the children receive "miraculous" abilities, including such superhero staples as flight, time-travel, and "a boy who could increase or reduce his size at will" (224, 227, 228). For his mind-reading narrator, Rushdie evokes the Shadow's 1930s radio slogan: "the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men" (229). The American Shadow, like so many of his descendants and predecessors, gained his powers from the mythical Orient, but the fantastical abilities that Rushdie awards the first citizens born in independent India mark the end of colonial exploitation and the transfer of real-world political power from colonizers to the formerly colonized.

Rushdie's use of superhero tropes, however, also reveals the character type's enduring relationship to colonialism. Since its earliest manifestations, the superhero genre has been a production of imperial culture in which the colonized are reduced to what Albert Memmi terms "an alter ego of the colonizer" (1957, 86). Colonialism, explains Ania Loomba, reshapes knowledge "to perpetuate an artificial sense of difference between 'self' and 'other'" (2005, 55), so that other, writes Robert Young, is "only knowable through a necessarily false representation" (1995, 5). Superhero narratives, emerging from a sub-genre of juvenile literature, are especially dependent on such imperial representations and divisions. "Empire," observes Elleke Boehmer, signifies "far realms of possibility, fantasy, and wish-fulfillment where identities and fortunes might be transformed" (2005, 26). Fulfilling the colonial implications of the formula, a mild-mannered citizen of Metropolis reveals himself to be an exotic alien with unparalleled powers fighting to safeguard his adoptive culture, a transformation that mirrors empire's claim as a rightfully dominating global power.

The superhero's imperial roots were established well before Superman and other comic book incarnations of the character type. The genre, as first embodied in the Victorian penny dreadful *Spring-Heel'd Jack*, originates as a reflection of English nineteenth-century colonialism. Through adaptations by Edgar Rice Burroughs and later American authors, the superhero evolved into a reflection of US imperialism in the first half of the twentieth century, and that imperial past continues to haunt the genre. While personifying empire-authority in both the British and American periods, the early superhero owes his origin, powers, and plot to colonial peripheries. The superhero absorbs elements of the racial other, disturbing but not overthrowing the imperial binary as a dual identity character who uses otherness to maintain the empire.

THE FIRST SUPERHERO

The superhero's constituent genres—fantasy, adventure, science fiction, and detective fiction—originated and developed in direct relationship to nineteenth-century British colonialism, and by absorbing their elements, the superhero consolidates a myriad of imperial attitudes into a single character type. The earliest manifestation is Spring-Heeled Jack who, paralleling Britain's expansion from an empire of chartered entrepreneurs to one of direct governance, appeared in "at least a dozen plays, penny dreadfuls, story paper serials, and dime novel stories" (Nevins 2005, 821). "In format, illustration, content, and popularity," writes Sheila Egoff, such serial stories in boys' sensational magazines "were matched only by the rise and influence of the comic book in the mid-twentieth century" (1980, 413). Peter Coogan acknowledges the character as the first "to fulfill the core definitional elements of the superhero" (2006, 177), and Jess Nevins declares him "the source of the 20th century concept of the dual identity costumed hero" (2005, 822).

It is striking then how deeply Spring-Heeled Jack is immersed in colonial narratives. In Alfred Burrage's (1885) first treatment, Jack's father makes his fortune in India before dying, allowing a cousin to cheat Jack of his inheritance through the aid of a family lawyer who claims Jack's "Indian plantations" (unpaginated). The outlying colonial possessions both initiate the plot and provide its fantastical solution. Jack explains:

> I had for a tutor an old Moonshee, who had formerly been connected with a troop of conjurers . . . this Moonshee taught me the mechanism of a boot which . . . enabled him to spring fifteen or twenty feet in the air, and from thirty to forty feet in a horizontal direction.

With the aid of this "magical boot" which "savoured strongly of sorcery," Jack robs his enemies until his inheritance is restored. He is a colonizer who has taken an Asian's fantastical object to gain power at the metropole. Although technically a criminal, "Jack, who had been brought up under the shadow of the East India Company, had not many scruples as to the course of life he had resolved to adopt. To him pillage and robbery seemed to be the right of the well-born."

As the first dual identity hero, Jack also imports a secondary persona that is not only contrastingly alien to his primary self but magical and demonic. As Richard Reynolds observes of the superhero character type, "His costume marks him out as a proponent of change and exoticism," but because of his split self he "is both the exotic and the agent of order which brings the exotic to book" (1992, 83). Robert Young notes how many nineteenth century novels "are concerned with meeting

© American Political Science Association, 2014
doi:10.1017/S1049096513001649
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096513001649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and incorporating the culture of the other" and so "often fantasize crossing into it, though rarely so completely as when Dr Jekyll transforms himself into Mr Hyde" (1995, 3). So complete a binary transformation, while rare in other genres, is one of the defining tropes of the superhero, where a Jekyll-controlled Hyde defines what Marc Singer identifies as "the generic ideology of the superhero" in which "exotic outsiders ... work to preserve" the status quo (2002, 110).

Spring-Heeled Jack emerged during England's expansion as an imperial power and vanished during the British Empire's transition from traditional colonies to settler nation. When Burrage updated Spring-Heeled Jack in 1904, he removed the character from his Indian origins and contracted the plot-driving periphery to France. The post-Victorian serial was discontinued before it reached narrative closure (Nevins 2005, 824). Martin Green argues that "Britain after 1918 stopped enjoying adventure stories" because such narratives "become less relevant and attractive to a society which has ceased to expand and has begun to repent its former imperialism" (1984, 4). In contrast, the United States continued as "a world ruler," making the adventure story "a peculiarly American form" (4–5). The British superhero and the British Empire halted together, but the narrative type and its colonialist underpinnings were adopted by American authors as the United States pursued its own imperial ambitions.

AMERICAN SUPERMEN

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner proposed that American history "has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West" (1921, 1). In 1898, the United States fought its last battle with native tribes and took possession of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. To expand its naval capabilities, it instigated the 1903 secession of Panama from Columbia and the construction of the Panama Canal. When *All-Story* serialized Edgar Rice Burroughs' first novel, *Under the Moons of Mars*, in 1912, the canal was still two years from completion, but the United States was already a global power.

Burroughs' John Carter is a fantastical embodiment of Memmi's colonizer. Like Spring-Heeled Jack, Carter is altered by his colonial travels, but Burroughs emphasizes the frontier by making the transformation dependent on the foreign environment. Carter's "superhuman" powers are a product of "the lesser gravitation and lower air pressure on Mars" (23, 21). Burroughs also satisfies the colonial wish for "the disappearance of the usurped" (Memmi 1957, 52) by making the cities of Barsoom "deserted metropolises of an ancient Martian civilization," establishing Carter's right of exploitation (50). Mars' impossibly static cultures exemplify the "anthropological fantasy" described by John Rieder: "Although we know that these people exist here and now, we also consider them to exist in the past" (2008, 32). Sharon DeGraw describes "Burroughs' choice of an interplanetary setting" rather than an Earthly one for the first American superman as evidence of a "specifically American bias"; "While the United States was a colonial and imperial power, like its Old World predecessors," argues DeGraw, "Americans ... chose to ignore their own imperial attitudes and activities or interpret them in a more benevolent light than that of other European peoples" (2007, 28).

Burroughs follows similar strategies in *Tarzan of the Apes*, published eight months later and a core source for later superhero creators. Like Barsoom, Burroughs' West British Africa is an impossibly "primeval world" that "our ancestors of the dim and distant past faced" (1999, 17, 19). Burroughs populates the colony with a language-speaking species of "anthropoid ape" whose religion was practiced by "our fierce, hairy forebears ... of the long dead past" (24, 60). Such a frozen culture reflects Said's "central argument" of orientalism, "the myth of the arrested development of the Semites" that justifies colonial enterprises (*Orientalism* 307).

Jeff Berglund emphasizes that *Tarzan of the Apes* was set "during the height of British imperialism and during the escalation of the United States' own empire-building" and so works to "re-establish the authority of imperial power" (1999, 79). The British-American imperial link is further evidenced in Burroughs' acknowledgement of Kipling's 1894 *The Jungle Book* as one of his primary influences (Lupoff 2005, 157). Burroughs also evokes the "British Colonial Office" as the grounding for his tale's authenticity and as the motivation that initiates its plot (1).

Burroughs figures his "superman" as a revitalizing heir to England's softening empire (226). He champions the transformative powers of the colonial periphery to counteract the dissipation of the British metropole. Where his parents fall victim to the ungovernable colony, the infant Lord Greystoke—rechristened Tarzan or "White-Skin" by his adopted ape mother (39)—grows to "physical perfection," "unmarred by dissipation, or brutal or degrading passions" (128, 184). Tarzan, writes Berglund, is an "American Adam," the quintessentially "self-made man" of American mythology (101, 100). Like Spring-Heeled Jack, he retains his otherness after leaving the colonies, but rather than sailing to England to reclaim his lost estates from his own usurping cousin, Tarzan follows Jane to Baltimore and Wisconsin in the hopes of marriage. With that union and its turning away from England, the imperial project is figuratively transferred to the United States.

IMPERIAL EXPANSION

New American supermen proliferated through the 1920s and 1930s, appropriating superpowers from a range of non-Western locations—Africa, Antarctica, Central America, Middle East, Asia, Australia. Walter Gibson's Shadow, the most popular pulp and radio superhero of the thirties, "went to India, to Egypt, to China ... to learn the old mysteries that modern science has not yet rediscovered, the natural magic ..." (Gibson & Bierstadt 1937). When Harry Earnshaw and Raymond Morgan created *Chandu the Magician* for radio and film, they sent their secret agent to India to gain supernatural powers from yogis. Lee Falk's Mandrake the Magician, another Tibetan-powered American, is accompanied by Lothar, an African prince dressed in a Tarzan-copied leopard skin plus a Turkish fez. Falk's Phantom gains his dual identity in the fictional Asian country of Bengalla—which Falk later transposes to Africa. In each case the interchangeable, colonial periphery is redirected for the good of the metropole. As Said observes of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096513001649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the early twentieth century, "now the orient must be made to perform, its power must be enlisted on the side of 'our' values, civilization, interests, goals" (1978, 208).

Lester Dent's Doc Savage reflects a specifically American brand of imperialism when he travels to "the Valley of the Vanished" to find a "lost clan of ancient Mayans" believed extinct since Spanish colonization (2008, 38, 17). Already part-other from his abilities and his ambiguously bronze skin, Savage refuses marriage with a princess and returns to the metropole with a gift of Mayan gold to finance his do-gooding missions. In this rendering of the colonial dynamic, colonized subjects, while still providing the narrative's foundation, are kept willingly hidden in a static preserve seemingly unrelated to any actual Indians within the borders of a contemporary United States. Unlike late nineteenth British colonialism, early twentieth century American imperialism evolved from a myth of frontier as a free and unpopulated periphery, requiring the colonized other to vanish. Where *Spring-Heel'd Jack* refers openly to abusive colonial practices, American superhero narratives avoid acknowledgement of empire, representing what John Carlos Rowe identifies as the nation's "contradictory self-conceptions" in which "Americans' interpretations of themselves as people are shaped by a powerful imperial desire and a profound anticolonial temper" (2000, 3).

When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster entered the comic book industry in the mid-1930s, the tropes of imperial superheroism were already ubiquitous. Superman, rather than constituting the first superhero, epitomized the genre. He takes his origin from the lost planet motif, a science fiction variation on the lost world genre introduced by H. Rider Haggard in 1885, one of several narratives of "triumphalism" which, "far from casting doubt on the imperial undertaking," argues Said, "serve to confirm and celebrate its success" because heroes "find what they're looking for, adventurers return home safe and wealthier" (1993, 187).

After the frontier of Krypton was destroyed and its lone survivor adopted Tarzan-like for the benefit of Metropolis, imperial supermen inundated newsstands. Victor Fox, the first publisher to produce an overt imitation, hired artist-writer Will Eisner who responded with Wonderman, a flying, leotard-clad strong man whom Circuit Judge Augustus Hand declared a copyright infringement (Payne). In his first panel, Wonderman's blonde, American alter ego receives a magic ring from a turbaned Tibetan, another descendant of Spring-Heeled Jack's boot-bestowing Moonshee. Unlike Krypton, Eisner's locale has a real-world counterpart, but this "Tibet" is an orientalist construct, a pulp stereotype inherited from a deep range of earlier writers.

Having discontinued Wonderman after DC's injunction, *Wonder Comics* #2 features another Will Eisner creation, Yarko the Great, with his orientalist inspiration foregrounded in the hero's amulet-crested turban. Donald Markstein documents Yarko as only one of a dozen Mandrake-inspired comic book magicians to appear between 1938 and 1941; nine of the characters wear Chandu-copied turbans and one a fez, and three are assisted by Asian servants. Another half dozen comic book superheroes of the same period also receive orientalist origins for their powers, three involving Tibet. Egypt contributes its own subset of characters, with archeologist superheroes traveling the periphery from the Middle East to Central America.

William Marston and Harry Peter's Wonder Woman and Bill Everett's Sub-Mariner, an Amazon princess from an island hidden in former colonial waters and an Atlantean prince from an underwater homeland encroached on by land-dwellers, further incorporate imperial origins into some of the most popular Golden Age superheroes. For Captain Marvel, C. C. Beck and Bill Parker created the wizard Shazam, whose acronymic name begins with the Middle Eastern Solomon. In his first year, Batman faces eastern European vampires, fez-wearing henchmen, and a band of fake Hindus seeking "an ancient Hindu idol, Kila, the God of Destruction" (Kane, Finger, and Fox, 2006,87). Even the *Arabian Nights*—"shorthand for magic and the exotic" since the mid-nineteenth century (Boehmer 2005, 43)—is recycled in Bill Finger and Martin Nodell's Green Lantern. The simplified visual and narrative formulas of the Golden Age comic book were a fertile outlet for the larger culture's unexamined biases. "It is as if," writes Said, "... a bin called 'Oriental' existed into which all the authoritative, anonymous, and traditional Western attitudes to the East were dumped unthinkingly" (1978, 102).

NEW BOUNDARIES

Superheroes' popularity declined in the aftermath of World War II and largely vanished by the early 1950s. When the genre resurged a decade later, it was in a neocolonial context that disguised but did not erase its imperial roots. When DC reintroduced Green Lantern in 1959, John Broome and Gil Kane superficially transposed the character's *Arabian Nights* antecedents to outer space through the trope of a dying alien who, like so many orientalist predecessors, gives superpowers to a Caucasian hero. The revised Lantern also received an Inuit sidekick, but the genre's colonial frontier shifted to Earth's upper atmosphere with Joe Gill and Steve Ditko's 1960 Captain Atom, a rocket technician who acquires his powers after accidentally launched and atomized in an explosion. Ditko soon moved from Charlton to Marvel Comics, where he, Stan Lee, and Jack Kirby, the most celebrated creators of the Silver Age, further distanced superheroes from their nineteenth-century roots.

Adventurers still returned from far realms of possibility with identities triumphantly transformed, but where earlier American imperial tales relied on the myth of a free and unpopulated periphery, outer space actualized the colonial wish for the disappearance of the usurped. Superman's Krypton and Wonderman's Tibet are interchangeable in their imperial implications, but the Fantastic Four visit a frontier free of racial others. Cosmic rays bestow superpowers without the exploitation of a culture beyond the metropole. Jeffrey Kripal discusses the fantasy and superhero genres' need for "a Somewhere Else, an Other" that is "distant or foreign to Europe," such as Tibet which by the late nineteenth century had "taken central stage, primarily through British colonialism" (2011, 31, 41). Beginning with Superman, however, Kripal observes a shift from mysticism to science fiction, "from the mytheme of Orientation to Alienation" (73), and then in the 1960s to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096513001649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mytheme of Radiation as "a kind of spiritual power or mystical energy" (125).

Because the source of a hero's powers is relocated inside the metropole, the new trope revised the imperial binary and so the formerly transformative frontier faded. The origin tales of the Hulk, Spider-Man, Ant-Man, Wasp, Daredevil, and the X-Men require no travel outside the United States. For Thor, the hero's alter ego is only "vacationing in Europe!" (*Marvel Firsts* 115), and although captured in South Vietnam and aided by Don Heck's stereotypically drawn Professor Yinsen, Tony Stark uses the magic of his own American technology to transform himself. This movement away from frontier narratives paralleled the larger global shift away from formal colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s. Seventeen former French, British, and Belgian colonies emerged as independent nations in 1960 alone, most in Africa. When Lee and Kirby did venture into that former periphery in 1966, the fictional and never-colonized nation of Wakanda maintains control of its magical technology instead of giving it to a Caucasian visitor, producing comic books' first African superhero, the Black Panther.

Despite such changes, imperialism continued both within US foreign policy and the superhero narratives that reflected it. While advocating decolonization, the United States expanded its neocolonial control of emerging nations, relying on economic exploitation rather than military occupation. Similarly, former orientalist tropes of the penny dreadfuls and pulps continued in Silver Age comics. The 1961 Doctor Droom, Stan Lee's first Marvel superhero, gains his powers from another Tibetan lama. Kirby even gives Droom stereotypically slanted eyes and a Fu Manchu moustache as the lama explains: "I have transformed you! I have given you an appearance suitable to your new role!" (*Marvel Firsts* 40). Lee reused the imperial origin story for the villain Doctor Doom in 1961 and then Doctor Strange in 1963, sending another American to Tibet to return with magical powers and an Asian servant, as did Peter Morisi for Charlton Comics' 1966 Thunderbolt—a Tibetan origin to be reproduced yet again by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons for the Thunderbolt-based Ozymandias in the *Watchmen*.

Later creators continued to perpetuate imperial narratives, as observed in the multiple incarnations of Marvel's Iron Fist. Beginning in 1974, the Roy Thomas and Gil Kane character travels to a mystical Asian city where he gains superpowers and returns to the United States to become a superhero. Like the nation of Wakanda, the city of K'un-L'un is a fictional location, but one derived from such a thinly disguised real-world counterpart (the Kunlun Mountains form the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau) that the my theme of orientation remains. Iron Fist was adventuring beside one of Marvel's first African American superheroes, Luke Cage, when Rushdie and Said published their major works. If the critiques of *Orientalism* filtered into comics, they lessened but did not eradicate superheroes' original orientation. Expanding on Frank Miller's 1985 *Batman: Year One*, the twenty-first century Batman of Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) travels to the Himalayas to learn his skills from a martial arts mentor and future adversary; Nolan's Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) is likened to a Burmese anarchist, figuring Batman as the embodiment of imperial order. "How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another?" asks Said (1978, 15). In the case of superheroes, it is through the unexamined repetition of fossilized conventions that encode the colonialist attitudes that helped to create the original character type and continue to define it in relation to imperial practices. ■

REFERENCES

Berglund, Jeff. 1999. "Write, Right, White, Rite: Literacy, Imperialism, Race, and Cannibalism in Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan of the Apes." *Studies in American Fiction* 27.1 (Spring): 53–76. JSTOR. Web.

Boehmer, Elleke. 2005. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors.* Second edition. Oxford: Oxford.

Burrage, Alfred S. 1885, *Spring-Heel'd Jack: The Terror of London. The Boy's Standard.* 18 July–August 1885. Project Gutenberg Australia. Accessed August 25, 2010.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. 1983. *A Princess of Mars.* New York: Ballantine.

———. 1999. *Tarzan of the Apes.* New York: Tor.

Cheyfitz, Eric. 1991. *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan.* New York: Oxford.

Coogan, Peter. 2006. *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre.* Austin, Texas: Monkey Brain.

DeGraw, Sharon. 2007. *The Subject of Race in American Science Fiction.* New York: Routledge.

Dent, Lester. 2008. *The Man of Bronze. Doc Savage* 14. San Antonio: Sanctum Productions.

Egoff, Sheila. 1980. "Precepts, Pleasures, and Portents: Changing Empases in Children's Literature." *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature.* Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Gibson, Walter B., and Edward Hale Bierstadt. 1937. "The Death House Rescue." *The Shadow.* Mutual Broadcasting System. September 26.

Green, Martin. 1984. *The Great American Adventure.* Boston: Beacon.

Kane, Bob, Bill Finger, and Gardner Fox. 2006. *The Batman Chronicles.* vol. 1. New York: DC Comics.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2011. *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Loomba, Ania. 2005. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism.* 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Lupoff, Richard A. 2005. *Master of Adventure: The Worlds of Edgar Rice Burroughs.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Markstein, Donald D. 2010. *Don Markstein's Toonopedia.* toonopedia.com. Accessed August 20, 2010.

Marvel Firsts: The 1960s. 2011. New York: Marvel Worldwide.

Mein, Eric. 2006. "A Princess of Where? Burroughs's Imaginary Lack of Place." *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 53 : 42–47.

Memmi, Albert. 1957. *The Colonizer and the Colonized.* Boston: Beacon.

Nevins, Jess. 2005. "Spring-Heeled Jack." In *Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana.* 820–24. Austin: Monkey Brains.

Payne, Britton. 1940. "Superman v. Wonderman: Judge Hand's Side-By-Side Comparison for Superhero Infringement." brittonpayne.com/Marvel/SupermanWonderman.htm. Accessed August 25, 2010.

Reynolds, Richard. 1992. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Rieder, John. 2008. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Rowe, John Carlos. 2000. *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rushdie, Salman. 1981. *Midnight's Children.* New York: Random House.

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism.* New York: Pantheon.

———. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism.* New York: Knopf.

Singer, Marc. 2002. "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race." *African American Review* 36 (1): 107–19.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1921. *The Frontier in American History.* New York: Holt.

Young, Robert J. C. 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race.* London: Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096513001649 Published online by Cambridge University Press