Title of Paper: **Boys Gone Wild: Island Stranding, Cross-Racial Identification, and Metropolitan Masculinity in R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island***

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Section: Articles

Date of Publication: Issue: Volume 1, Number 1

Abstract:

Through an examination of R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858), I argue that island-stranding narratives stage a scene of struggle that is midway between metropole (where civilized men serve as the guarantors of order among savage boys) and colony (where young men, bearers of an already internalized civilization and culture, come into contact with the savagery of the colony). In *The Coral Island*, the vestigial savage masculinity and incipient feminine civilization of boyhood are pitted against each other according to a logic that casts the British boy as both colonizer and colonized. I argue that *The Coral Island* functions as wish-fulfillment narrative in which the supposedly innate savagery of British boys is revealed to be essentially different from the savagery of the colonial other insofar as the nascent, somehow innate, forces of civilization inherent in the still unformed British boy, guarantee the triumph of civilization even in the absence of colonizing British men. Savages, by contrast, appear to require violent, top-down, political and economic colonization, rather than the more invisible cultural and ideological colonization that the metropole enacts on its own boys, in order to be delivered into a state of reason and civilized enlightenment.

Keywords: gender; sexuality; race; empire; coral island; stranding; Ballantyne; boys’ fiction;

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A very favourite subject [at Rugby School] was the wonderful feats to be performed in the approaching holidays. I well remember a course of conversations on a hopeful plan of living on a desert island. The preliminary part of finding one, and being cast away upon it, was soon arranged; and we then proceeded to lay out the whole scheme of settlement, and quiet comfort. And these fancies were not merely an occasional amusement: while they lasted, they seemed to be the main object of our lives, and were thought of as constantly, and prosecuted as eagerly, as the most tangible objects of later ambition.


I can scarcely ever call on one of my contemporaries now-a-days without running across a boy already at school, or just ready to go there, whose bright looks and supple limbs remind me of his father, and our first meeting in old times. I can scarcely keep the Latin Grammar out of my own house any longer; and the sight of sons, nephews, and godsons, playing trap-bat-and-ball, and reading “Robinson Crusoe,” makes one ask oneself, whether there isn’t something one would like to say to them before they take their first plunge into the stream of life, away from their own homes, or while they are yet shivering after the first plunge.


European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self. Orientalism is never far from the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans. Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relations with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.

—Edward Said, Orientalism.

Unlike earlier eighteenth- and nineteenth-century island-stranding narratives featuring a lone man or an entire family marooned on a deserted tropical island, R. M. Ballantyne’s 1858 novel The Coral Island—“one of the most popular adventure tales for boys in the nineteenth century”—provides, in the mid-nineteenth century, a radically new version of the island-stranding genre within the still relatively new domain of Victorian literature for boys: the all-boy island stranding. While The Coral Island forms part of the well-established island-stranding genre—sometimes termed the robinsonade (after Daniel Defoe’s early eighteenth-century novel Robinson Crusoe)—earlier novels, popular both with the general Victorian reading public and especially with Victorian boy readers, differ from The Coral Island in that they recount island-stranding stories that focus not on boys but on adult men or families. Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), for example, tells the story of a lone man marooned on a tropical island, and Johann Wyss’s The Swiss Family Robinson (1812) tells the story of a family stranded on a tropical island. The Coral Island, however, unlike its well-known and frequently read literary predecessors, removes adults entirely from the scene of faraway stranding. And if European adults are understood as the bearers and guarantors of fully formed European culture and civilization in the far-flung lands of Europe’s colonial empires, then a certain sort of fully mature
The Victorian

Englishness accompanies Crusoe on his island stranding off of Brazil; similarly, a fully achieved Swissness inheres in the parents’ East Indies stranding in *The Swiss Family Robinson*. In both these novels, which were extremely popular extracurricular reading among Victorian boys, fully constituted Europeanness is put to the test far from the metropole in the far reaches of Europe’s colonial empires. In *The Coral Island*, however, there are no adults and thus no fully formed Europeanness to be tested. Instead there are merely boys, the precursors to adult men—and thus the precursors to a fully formed Englishness. If English adults ensure that English boys grow up to become Englishmen, then what *The Coral Island* puts to the test in its narrative of South Pacific island stranding is not Englishness but English boyhood. Moreover, in playing out colonial desires and anxieties in a geographic and imaginative space that is neither metropole nor colony island-stranding fiction offers a site for this analysis in the liminal space of the exotic, tropical island.

I aim to tease out and unpack the emergence of a particular kind of normative boyhood, masculinity, and Britishness in island-stranding literature. Here are the source materials: Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, the story of a single adult man marooned on a tropical island; Johann Wyss’s *The Swiss Family Robinson*, 1812, the story of a family stranded on a tropical island; Ballantyne’s *Coral Island*, 1858, which recounts the story of three boys alternately stranded on various South Pacific islands and sailing with pirates; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, 1883, the adventures of a boy searching for treasure and battling pirates in the South Pacific; J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, 1904, which involves a boy, who never wants to grow up, stranded on an island of boys, a few pirates, and a handful of Indians; William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, 1954, a sort of anti-*Coral Island* in which boys are transformed by the tropical island stranding not into hardy young Britons fit to run the Empire but, instead, into violent savages hardly different from the uncivilized masses ruled over in the British Empire. How do these specific incarnations of the island-stranding narrative function differently in their particular historical contexts? In reference to Laura Brown’s notion of a narrative that persistently and materially circulates and recycles through time, what function does this “cultural fable” of the island stranding serve? What cultural labors does it perform in the construction of genders, sexualities, and nationalities at particular historical moments? How does the island-stranding narrative morph and reemerge in relation to the shifting social formations of early capitalism, industrial capitalism, colonial capitalism, and global capitalism? I will leave these larger questions in suspension for the moment but will return to them briefly at the end of this article, suggesting, I hope, preliminary avenues for their investigation.

In 1719, with the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe launches into British literature the “cultural fable” of the island-stranding narrative, and by the mid-nineteenth century the island-stranding story has already become a site for imagining both boyhood adventure and the very beginnings of European civilization. For the island-stranding narrative functions both as a liminal space outside of the metropole, the public school, and the colonies in which to experience adventure and acquire rugged masculinity; it also functions as a liminal space in which proto-capitalist European civilization emerges from the morass of pre-European savagery. Already, in 1836, more than twenty years before the publication of *The Coral Island*, the boys...
of Rugby School imagine escaping the regimen of public school through island-stranding fantasy. Here is one boy’s recounting of his school experiences in a student newspaper:

Under this constant restraint of feelings [at Rugby School], there are few openings at a private school for a counterbalancing activity…. Thus a very favourite subject was the wonderful feats to be performed in the approaching holidays…. I well remember a course of conversations on a hopeful plan of living on a desert island. The preliminary part of finding one, and being cast away upon it, was soon arranged; and we then proceeded to lay out the whole scheme of settlement, and quiet comfort. And these fancies were not merely an occasional amusement: while they lasted, they seemed to be the main object of our lives, and were thought of as constantly, and prosecuted as eagerly, as the most tangible objects of later ambition.6

And by 1867, Karl Marx, in Capital, identifies the island-stranding narrative as the prototypical example of the emergence of European civilization from the pre-civilized Oriental past. “As political economists are fond of Robinson Crusoe stories, let us first look at Robinson on his island.”7 Marx identifies the lone Robinson as the individual proto-capitalist precursor to capitalism proper, understood as a social formation:

Let us…imagine…an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force. All the characteristics of Robinson’s labour are repeated here, but with the difference that they are social [that is, capitalist] instead of individual.8

And insofar as these characteristics are social, they constitute the grounds specifically of capitalist production and exchange. The spontaneous, unmediated, unabstracted form of labor that Robinson practices, which, according to Marx, “we find at the threshold of the history of all civilized peoples,”9 can be glimpsed as well in Britain’s colonies, that anachronistic space that replays Europe’s past in a geographically displaced present:

‘…[C]ommunal property in its natural, spontaneous form is…[i]n fact…the primitive form that we can prove to have existed among Romans, Teutons and Celts, and which indeed still exists to this day in India…. Thus the different original types of Roman and Germanic private property can be deduced from the different forms of Indian communal property.’10

The island-stranding narrative thus not only stages a moment between pre-capitalism and capitalism and between prehistory and history, but also reveals the unstable division between Orient and Occident and between savagery and civilization. In this way, through thrilling adventures that take place literally and figuratively in a space of multiple liminalities, the island-stranding narrative functions to secure the triumphal emergence of British modernity from the morass of prehistory and feudalism as well as the “natural” and inevitable hegemony of Occident over Orient and of civilization over savagery.

Not only does Ballantyne’s novel inaugurate a radically new version of the island-stranding narrative, but The Coral Island is also one of the first best-selling novels for boys and thus marks an important moment in nineteenth-century British
The culture of boyhood in the late 1850s curiously emerges, however, enmeshed in shifting notions of race and gender. The 1857 Sepoy Rebellion in particular marks a watershed moment in changing metropolitan notions of race and colonial rule. Following the Rebellion, British attitudes toward Indians in particular, and toward nonwhites under colonial rule more generally, shift from a firm but self-professed benevolent civilizing and Christianizing mission toward a heavy-handed surveillance of policing and control. Patrick Brantlinger goes so far as to say that “no episode in British imperial history raised public excitement to a higher pitch than the Indian Mutiny of 1857.” Pointing to the Sepoy Rebellion as perhaps the most influential event in shaping nineteenth-century notions of race and colonialism which, finally, marks the 1850s as “a turning point for imperialist ideology,” Brantlinger explains that Victorian writing about the Rebellion not only functions as a conduit that “expresses in concentrated form the racist ideology that Edward Said calls Orientalism” but also marks a sea change in public attitudes about colonialism, race, and the civilizing mission:

Victorian accounts of the Mutiny display extreme forms of extropunitive projection, the racist patterns of blaming the victim expressed in terms of an absolute polarization of good and evil, innocence and guilt, justice and injustice, moral restraint and sexuality depravity, civilization and barbarism. British writing about India before 1857 was also racist, but it frequently admitted the possibility that Indians might be helped to progress in the scale of civilization. Evangelical or utilitarian reforms would convert Indians, more or less rapidly, from barbarism to western and specifically British ways. After the Mutiny these hopeful though obviously ethnocentric possibilities are often denied. India is portrayed as mired in changeless patterns of superstition and violence which can be dominated but not necessarily altered for the better.

The double desire both to civilize and to dominate not only reveals an already contradictory set of colonial demands, but also foregrounds a paradox at the heart of Britishness itself: British efforts to civilize the savage colonial other, render more and more indistinguishable “British ways” from the “barbarism” they attempt to eradicate: so much so that “civilized metropolitan Briton” and “savage colonial other” cease to represent wholly distinct subjectivities. As a result, colonizing Britons risk, at every moment, appearing more savage than the savages they are ostensibly attempting to civilize.

Brantlinger traces the literary effects of such contradictions and demonstrates their surprising longevity through fifty years and more: “For the first two decades after the event,” Brantlinger explains, “most novels about the Mutiny are flawed by structural contradictions,” and furthermore “most of the Mutiny novels written after the 1870s express no better understanding of India and Indians….” The “[i]nnumerable essays, sermons, novels, poems, and plays,” which appear in the years and decades following the Rebellion and which exhibit “a general racist and political hysteria,” reveal the discursive mechanisms by which the Rebellion itself never makes it into cultural circulation but is instead eclipsed by a rapidly circulating and over-determined “cultural fable,” which functions as a repository and vehicle for the “rape and castration fantasies” and “sadistic fantasies” characteristic of Orientalism. Under the guise of historical truth, fables of the Rebellion thus become a mechanism
through which not only the colonial other, but also the metropolitan subject, is produced, managed, and regulated.

It seems not incidental that both Brantlinger and some of his nineteenth-century contemporaries, in their discussions of the Rebellion, come back again and again to the act of imagining the Rebellion’s power over the British population. Citing an article entitled “The Indian Mutiny in Fiction,” appearing in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Brantlinger explains: “In 1897, Hilda Gregg remarked that ‘of all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination.’” Brantlinger himself returns several times to the imagination, explaining that moments too horrible to be named, in one Rebellion novel, function as textual “holes to be filled with the imagination of atrocities.” And again, Brantlinger explains that the literary shortcomings and narrative failures of another Rebellion novel “mirror…precisely the failure of many Victorians after 1857 to imagine any common ground between themselves and Indians.” While I will return later to the importance of Brantlinger’s claim of a “failure…to imagine,” what I wish to foreground here is the characterization of the Rebellion as a flash point for colonial imaginings and as a site of skirmishes over historical accuracy and truth. While it is not surprising that claims of Indian atrocities are exaggerated at the time of the Rebellion and though it may appear mundane in the modern age to wish to emphasize the discursive circulation of the Rebellion not as reality but as reality effect, it is surprising that so much contemporary criticism of Ballantyne’s *Coral Island* seems to mirror these same nineteenth-century concerns over supposed truth (reality) and lies (reality effect).

Recent criticism of *The Coral Island* remains largely caught up in these same false binaries, tending to make one of two claims: either Ballantyne’s novel passes off racist fiction as fact and in so doing reflects and reinforces dominant colonial ideology which depicts natives as savage and in urgent need of British civilization; or the novel mixes fact and fiction in such a way that foregrounds the very contradictions that underpin ideology and, as a result, destabilizes and critiques ideology itself. In both cases, however, the notions of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, are reified and naturalized, as if, in the case of *The Coral Island*, the absolute and undistorted truth of the cultural practices of the peoples of the South Pacific (an already homogenized and, therefore, “false” representation of a heterogeneous group of peoples and cultures) could be empirically isolated and then compared and contrasted with the racist colonial falsehoods depicted in the novel. Moreover, critics’ emphases on fiction—either as the prime weapon in ideology’s arsenal or as that destabilizing force that promises to undercut ideology—and its absolute distinction from truth and reality implicitly allude to the utopian fantasy of a discursive world in which there is no fiction but only truth, a world in which there is no ideology to promulgate or to undermine, but merely reality to appreciate and drink in.

As a result of their reliance on ostensibly stable self-evident binaries, many critics’ central arguments circle around a common set of doublings: boyhood and manhood, masculinity and femininity, civilization and savagery, and metropolitan and colonial subjectivities. But it is instead the instability and cross-contamination of these binaries and the concomitant definitional skirmishes aimed at maintaining their
absolute distinction that interest me here. And these instabilities become most apparent not at the core of critics’ arguments but in the periphery of their passing remarks. Martine Hennard Dutheil, for example, in “The Representation of the Cannibal in Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*: Colonial Anxieties in Victorian Popular Fiction,” points to “a recognition of the narrator’s own savagery” as a moment in which *The Coral Island* produces an instability that undermines colonial ideology insofar as it reveals savagery at the heart of Britishness, its supposed antithesis. Fiona McCulloch, in “‘The Broken Telescope’: Misrepresentation in *The Coral Island*,” points to this same sort of partial breakdown between civilized and savage when she explains that native South Pacific voices in Ballantyne’s novel appear always and only routed through the authorizing language of British racial stereotypes: “In Ballantyne’s novel the native’s voice is erased and, when focused upon at all, is only uttered through western mimicry, an English echo chamber of authorized language.”

Similarly, in “Recasting Crusoe: Frederick Marryat, R. M. Ballantyne and the Nineteenth-Century Robinsonade,” Susan Naramore Maher returns again and again to an unassimilable savagery enmeshed in metropolitan civilization—this time, in metropolitan boyhood—in her discussion of Frederick Marryat’s best-selling island-stranding novel *Masterman Ready* (1841-1842). While Maher insists on the domestic bliss of the shipwrecked Seagrave family as they re-create civilization on their tropical island, she also makes repeated asides about Tommy Seagrave, the family’s youngest child, and his failure to fit the model of metropolitan triumph in the colonial setting: “[o]nly one thing threatens these domestic Crusoes: the unrestrained instinct of cannibals and of little Tommy Seagrave, whose sole purpose in the novel is to impress upon young readers the gravity of selfishness”; “[e]xcept for instinctive Tommy, the Seagraves are exemplary”; “[t]he castaways, Tommy excepted, act out all the graven images of Victorian iconography….”

Moments of metropolitan savagery seem not only to characterize island-stranding adventure fiction but to infuse it—and the very act of reading it—with certain perils to which boys are particularly prone. Nearly eighty years after *Robinson Crusoe* and sixty years before *The Coral Island*, Maria Edgeworth cautions parents against the Oriental allure of Defoe’s tale. Citing Edgeworth, Maher writes:

> Edgeworth and others objected to the romance in Defoe’s novel. Edgeworth warned in her influential *Practical Education* (1799) that “a boy, who at seven years old longs to be Robinson Crusoe, or Sinbad the Sailor, may at seventeen, retain the same taste for adventure and enterprise.”

Edgeworth’s concern is that longing to be Robinson Crusoe or Sinbad the Sailor provides boys with a dangerous and addictive “taste for adventure”; but crucially the longing to be Robinson Crusoe, a white Briton, is coded as the same as the longing to be Sinbad the Sailor, an Arab pirate. By a series of slippages, to long to be a Briton stranded on a tropical island is to long to be both Oriental (Sinbad) and to live outside of metropolitan capitalism and outside the nation state (as a pirate). Moreover, this boyhood longing risks creating a desire that takes root and persists into adulthood. Given all these instances of colonial longing, of racial tainting, and of metropolitan savagery—both in *The Coral Island* and in criticism of the novel—it is surprising to come back to Brantlinger’s earlier contention about the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion, where he asserts that what marks this period is “the failure of many
The Victorians after 1857 to imagine any common ground between themselves and Indians.” It seems, on the contrary, that in the years leading up to the Rebellion, Britons could do nothing but anxiously imagine the thrill and the threat of common ground between themselves and the colonial other—even if this imagining took the form of a panic that revealed the uncivilized savagery at the heart of metropolitan civilization at the same time that it sought to insist on an absolute difference between colonizer and colonized. And in the years following the Rebellion, it seems that these imaginings did not cease but instead proliferated, as is evidenced, for example, by the plethora of Rebellion novels produced in the years and decades following 1857. Rather than reading these imaginings as potential interruptions, challenges, or destabilizations to colonial ideology as do many critics of *The Coral Island*, I wish, instead, to argue for their productive use value. British boys gone native do not simply demonstrate the horrors of the colonial other but actively produce the metropolitan subject. Metropolitan savagery does not threaten metropolitan civilization but in fact produces it.

The valorization of metropolitan savagery is simultaneously linked at this time to a growing concern over the feminization of British boys. For at the same time that the colonial and racial other becomes a site of increasing menace in relation to the metropolitan subject, women also become a site of increasing anxiety in relation to metropolitan boyhood masculinity. For example, a year before the publication of *The Coral Island*, near the opening of Thomas Hughes’s best-selling 1857 boys’ public school novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, an aging male stable hand takes young Tom under his tutelage, teaches him the arts of sport, fighting, and hunting, largely because he “fear[s] much…lest Master Tom should fall back again into the hands of [his nurse] and the [other] women.” As Tom passes his days playing outdoors and “speculat[es] on the possibility of turning the elm into a dwelling-place for himself and friends after the manner of the Swiss Family Robinson,” the women in his life retreat lest they contaminate him with femininity: “…none of the women now, not even his mother’s maid, dared offer to help him in dressing or washing…. [H]e would have gone without nether integuments altogether, sooner than have had recourse to female valeting.” Similarly, recall that Frederic W. Farrar’s 1858 boys’ public school novel *Eric; or, Little by Little* also declares in its opening pages, again offering a lens through which to understand the narrative to follow, “Beyond a certain age no boy of spirit can be safely guided by a woman’s hand alone.” In both Hughes’s and Farrar’s novels, the antidote to the contaminating encroachment of femininity is the all-boy public school, while in Ballantyne’s novel—as Hughes hints with his reference to Wyss’s *The Swiss Family Robinson*—the guarantor of normative boyhood masculinity is the all-boy island adventure.

For *The Coral Island* opens with a similar display of femininity coded as tempting but emasculating affective excess. Ralph Rover, the novel’s boy hero, has since infancy been an adventurer whose most triumphant exploits are predicated on the absence of feminine oversight:

> For some time past my infant legs had been gaining strength, so that I came to be dissatisfied with rubbing the skin off my chubby knees by walking on them, and made many attempts to stand up and walk like a
man.... One day I took advantage of my dear mother's absence to make another effort; and, to my joy, I actually succeeded in reaching the doorstep....

Ralph's boyhood education—and hence his initiation into normative masculinity and proper Britishness—takes the form of more and more distant wanderings through the forests and along the streams of his hometown until finally, at the age of fifteen, enthralled by accounts of "the Coral Islands of the Southern Seas" (4), Ralph urges his father to arrange an apprenticeship with a merchant sea captain about to set sail for the South Pacific. Ralph's father proudly obliges, Ralph's mother reluctantly capitulates, and on the eve of Ralph's departure

[m]y mother gave me her blessing and a small Bible; and her last request was that I would never forget to read a chapter every day, and say my prayers; which I promised, with tears in my eyes, that I would certainly do. (5)

Ralph's near loss of emotional control is here linked not only with femininity—both his mother's and his own—but also with Christianity. This entanglement of femininity and Christianity constitutes one of the central problematics that the novel attempts to negotiate: how can a boy be both masculine and Christian, both virile and civilized, both normative in terms of gender and normative in terms of national subjectivity? For while femininity is precisely that which all boys, beyond a certain age, must escape, Christianity and civilization are precisely what make all metropolitan boys, beyond a certain age, properly British men.

For British boys to grow up into suitably masculine British men, they must thus both break with and disavow femininity (Ralph's attachment to his mother) at the same time that they inhabit a new and different kind of femininity that takes the form of hyperbolic masculinity (the all-male world of homosociality). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of Victorian homosociality offers one way of understanding how such feminine identifications among men—in the form of male-male libidinal attachments between men—can form the foundation not of homosexuality but of heterosexuality when these male-male attachments are routed through women. In this way, male-male *erotic* attachments become male-male *social* attachments that take the form of rivalry for female sex objects—the threat of homosexuality miraculously and magically transformed into the guarantee of heterosexuality, all the while preserving the pleasures and powers of male-male attachments, but simply in a different form.34

It thus comes as no surprise that Ralph's first step from boyhood femininity to young-male masculinity should be routed through homosociality. Once aboard ship, Ralph quickly makes friends and inserts himself into a society of all boys:

There were a number of boys in the ship, but two of them were my special favourites. Jack Martin was a tall, strapping, broad-shouldered youth of eighteen, with a handsome, good-humoured, firm face. He had had a good education, was clever and hearty and lion-like in his actions, but mild and quiet in disposition. Jack was a general favourite, and had a peculiar fondness for me. My other companion was Peterkin Gay. He was little, quick, funny,
decidedly mischievous, and about fourteen years old. But Peterkin’s mischief was almost always harmless, else he could not have been so much beloved as he was. (6-7)

Following the intricate cultural logics of mid-nineteenth-century romantic friendships among boys, Ralph idolizes the older Jack’s strapping masculinity and is smitten with the younger Peterkin’s beloved boyishness. While male-male libidinal attachments here do not pass through the mediation of a female erotic object, they do pass through a feminized object: Peterkin. These attachments thus rely on a series of identifications that cast Ralph both as older, more masculine boy in relation to the feminized Peterkin and as younger, more effeminate boy in relation to the masculinized Jack. Like Sedgwick’s homosocial triangulations of desire, identificatory desires between Ralph and Jack cast Ralph as man-in-the-making and between Ralph and Peterkin cast Ralph as man-already-made, providing Ralph the necessary masculinizing opportunities both to become a man like Jack and to be a man in relation to Peterkin.

All three boys, however, are men in the making insofar as they are already South Seas savages in the making. Just as Ralph’s normative masculinity is routed through feminine identifications, all of the boys’ civilized, white, metropolitan subjectivities are similarly triangulated, this time routed through savage, brown, colonial identifications. For part of the allure of the South Pacific for Ralph is native masculinity, so different from and more virile than his civilized Christianity. As Ralph explains, in the South Pacific “men were wild, bloodthirsty savages, excepting in those favoured isles to which the Gospel of our Saviour had been conveyed,” echoing again the taming, feminizing effects of the civilizing mission (4). After arriving in the South Pacific, Ralph and his crew encounter a deadly storm, their ship goes down, and Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin wash ashore on a tropical island, the sole survivors of the wreck. Far from the metropole, the boys quickly go native, learning how to gather fruit, make spears, hunt pigs, build shelters, and fashion rudimentary clothing, making use of the few items that remain from the shipwreck and of what they gather on the island. Jack is careful to use metropolitan knowledge gleaned from books in order to make rational sense of their new abode: “I have been a great reader of books of travel and adventure all my life,” Jack explains to Peterkin, “and that has put me up to a good many things that you are, perhaps, not acquainted with” (25). And although this civilized lens offers entry to their new savage surroundings, it functions much like the boys’ salvaged “penknife,” “pencil-case,” “whipcord,” and “sailmaker’s needle” (18-19)—it provides the boys a meager toehold in their efforts to stave off death, but it hardly provides the triumph of what under different circumstances could be a colonizing mission in the South Pacific. Instead immediately upon washing ashore, the boys are persistently described in the Orientalizing, racializing, bestial language normally reserved in other nineteenth-century texts for the colonial other. Ralph, unconscious and lying on the beach, is described by Peterkin as “just like an Egyptian mummy” (13); Peterkin, romping along the shore, is described as “capering and jumping about like a monkey” (22); and Jack solemnly declares, “If this is a desert island, we shall have to live very much like the wild beasts…” (17). Even Peterkin’s gleeful fantasies of colonial domination entail the boys first mixing with, and only then rising above, the natives:
“I have made up my mind that it’s capital…the most splendid prospect that ever lay before three jolly young tars. We’ve got an island all to ourselves. We’ll take possession in the name of the king; we’ll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of course we’ll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries.” (16)

Of course, civilized white boys cast as nonwhite savages plays havoc with the already unstable racial paradox that Homi K. Bhabha identifies at the heart of colonialism: the civilizing mission produces a civilized colonial other who is “almost the same, but not quite.”35 If, according to this logic, the nonwhite colonial other can never be transformed seamlessly and completely into white metropolitan sameness, how can British boys, persistently imagined through the racializing language of colonial savagery, ever emerge not as “almost the same” but as, quite simply, the same—as white, metropolitan Britons? How can sameness, here, be manufactured from difference? Which is another way of asking: How can white metropolitan normative masculinity be manufactured from boyhood?

The ending of The Coral Island works to perform a miraculous answer to these questions but not in a manner that resolves any of the contradictions structuring the entangled binaries of man and boy, metropole and colony, civilized and savage, masculine and feminine. Instead, the novel’s ending reveals the ways in which contradictions involving the discourses of gender, race, and national subjectivity constitute the very grounds of normative metropolitan masculinity and Britishness.

After months spent on the Coral Island, Ralph is abducted by pirates, spends months in servitude to his captors, during which time he witnesses endless violence—pirates massacring natives, natives cannibalizing other natives—and is eventually reunited with Jack and Peterkin on the Coral Island, complete with a schooner of his own. Wishing to engage in more South Seas adventure, all three boys agree to set sail for the island of Mango in order to rescue Avatea, a young native woman whom they befriended months earlier, from Tararo, a powerful native chief who wishes to hold Avatea captive rather than allow her to marry a converted Christian native, on another island, to whom she is engaged. The boys’ journey back to metropolitan normativity, now that they have been suitably tainted with island savagery and masculinity, takes the double form of a defense of Christianity and of normative male-female coupling.

It is at this point that a series of identificatory leapfrogs bring the boys back to metropolitan civilization and masculinity from the brink of colonial savagery. Already, upon the boys’ arrival on Mango, a new aura of heroic masculinity surrounds them: Peterkin uncharacteristically takes to “swaggering about the deck with his hands thrust into his breeches pockets”; Jack, in speaking with a native missionary teacher, refers to Ralph and Peterkin as “[m]y men”; and while Peterkin bristles at being referred to as Jack’s men, he nevertheless revels in his new status as man: “‘Now, ‘pon my word, that’s cool!’ said Peterkin; ‘his men, forsooth! Well, since we are to be men, we may as well come it as strong over these black chaps as we can’” (285-286). The boys’ identification with “men” is the first step in their remetropolitanization. Next, the native missionary offers a site of identification midway between heathen savage and Christian Briton. In assuring the native missionary that he is willing to risk his life to reunite Avatea with her fiancé, Jack pledges his devotion to God as he pledges his communion with the native missionary.
Jack says, “‘[Y]our Bible—our Bible—tells of ONE who delivers those who call on Him in the time of trouble…” (315). After a narrative almost entirely devoid of mentions of Christianity, Christianity becomes the circuitry through which the boys’ identification with savages metonymically brings them back to metropolitan subjectivity: “‘your Bible—our Bible’” (315).

Next, the sameness, but sameness with difference, that Bhabha identifies in the figure of the civilized colonial other—“almost the same, but not quite”—is transformed from native missionary to metropolitan missionary. In their negotiations with Tararo, the boys meet a British missionary, and their first encounter with him bears all the stereotypical hallmarks of the colonial encounter between colonizer and colonized:

The scene that met our eyes here was one that I shall never forget. On a rude bench in front of his house sat the chief [Tararo]. A native stood on his left hand, who from his dress seemed to be a teacher. On his right stood an English gentleman, who I at once and rightly concluded was a missionary. He was tall, thin, and apparently past forty, with a bald forehead and thin grey hair. The expression on his countenance was the most winning I ever saw, and his clear grey eye beamed with a look that was frank, fearless, loving, and truthful. (333)

As with Ralph’s initial encounter with Jack, Sedgwickian homosocial desire structures Ralph’s identification with idealized masculinity, with the following important substitutions: Ralph identifies no longer with savage non-whiteness but with civilized whiteness, and no longer with boyhood masculinity but with adult masculinity. In this way, the civilizing mission is the masculinizing mission.

In *Orientalism* Edward Said elaborates the by now well accepted claim that the Occident is constructed always in relation to the Orient, but the above scene demonstrates one set of metropolitan identificatory steps that might help us better understand the mechanism that produces Occidental subjectivity. “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self,” Said explains.

Orientalism is never far from…the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans…. Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relations with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. And one sees this identificatory positionality played out in the above scene in which the boys first identify with South Pacific natives, then identify with a native missionary, and finally identify with an English missionary. This chain of identification offers a concrete strategy for how the metropolitan subject might exercise, as Said explains, “*positional* superiority” in relation to the Oriental other “without ever losing…the relative upper hand.”

This shift in the novel from going native to going metropolitan has been noted by various critics, and Susan Naramore Maher reads this shift between the first and second parts of the novel, from adventure to religion, as a structural flaw in the literary art of the author that reveals the flattening effects of a novel meant only as a mouthpiece for colonial ideology:
Ralph and his two shipmates repeatedly escape harm’s way, yet seldom remark upon providence. With the arrival of cannibals and pirates, however, a forceful didacticism enters the novel. Formally, then, the novel is truncated. The first part borders on secular adventure; the second part argues for further missions in the South Seas. All the romance of boys deserted on an island runs aground once Ballantyne pursues a contemporary issue, christianizing the heathen. Moreover, the boys’ heraldic rescue of Avatea is deflated by propaganda. Even their quest, saving Avatea and the souls of cannibals, lacks dramatic moment because the quest reveals no inner spiritual or moral growth in Ralph, Jack, or Peterkin. Having rent asunder Robinson Crusoe’s crucial conflict, Ballantyne’s narrative founders in two distinct but incomplete halves.\

Again, according to Maher, the problem with The Coral Island, unlike its sophisticated predecessor Robinson Crusoe, is its clunky, unliterary didacticism. Martine Hennard Dutheil similarly characterizes this same break between the first and second halves of the novel as a shift from ahistorical literary adventure to the historical realities of colonialism: “In the second part of the novel…adventure can no longer be divorced from colonial history. The boys’ dream of isolation is shattered by the realities of empire and its emblematic characters: the cannibal, the pirate and the missionary.” While Maher’s and Dutheil’s readings focus on a jarring and important shift in the narrative to the language of Christianity and missionizing, their critiques, it seems to me, miss the mark when they hold up this shift as simply an example of bad writing. Perhaps, instead, the jolting shift from adventure to evangelism can be read as a moment of literary and linguistic instability that reveals the lurching attempts of ideology to smooth over contradiction. From this point of view, the apparent sharp break between adventure and the Christianizing mission can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between going native and going metropolitan. According to this way of reading, the adventure portion of the novel enables the boys to go native—eating and dressing like savages, swimming and hunting like savages—while the concluding evangelical portion of the novel is what leads the boys back to civilization, back to Christianity, and back to Britishness from the brink of colonial otherness. Or, put another way, the later missionizing portion of the novel stages the encounter, first, between native missionary and savage British boy and, next, between metropolitan missionary and savage British boy such that colonial difference is phantasmatically transformed into metropolitan sameness and non-whiteness into whiteness at the very moment that British boy is transformed into British man. Rather than locating this shift as an example of literary mediocrity, I instead read it as the linchpin that installs and maintains colonial savagery and racial otherness at the very foundation of metropolitan manhood and that enacts this installation as the social and sexual transformation from boy to man.

As the novel reaches its conclusion, with Avatea successfully reunited with her native Christian husband, thus ushering in gender-normative and religious-normative closure, Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin prepare to take leave both of the island of Mango and of their savage lives in order to return to the metropole new-born
Britons. In its final pages, however, the novel takes an unexpectedly sentimental turn, despite the masculine imperative of its preface:

If there is any boy or man who loves to be melancholy and morose, and who cannot enter with kindly sympathy into the regions of fun, let me seriously advise him to shut my book and put it away. It is not meant for him. (xxx).

And this preface is signed “RALPH ROVER,” not “R. M. Ballantyne,” and is thus firmly internal to this narrative of metropolitan masculine production. But in apparent contradiction with this prefatory imperative, the novel’s nostalgic conclusion reads:

To part is the lot of all mankind. The world is a scene of constant leave-taking, and the hands that grasp in cordial greeting to-day are doomed ere long to unite for the last time, when the quivering lips pronounce the word—“Farewell.” It is a sad thought, but should we on that account exclude it from our minds? May not a lesson worth learning be gathered in the contemplation of it? May it not, perchance, teach us to devote our thoughts more frequently and attentively to that land where we meet, but part no more? (336).

Such a nostalgic conclusion engenders key questions. Why all this sorrow over the boys’ presumably joyous return to the metropole? Why all this sadness over the boys’ acquisition, finally, of triumphant masculinity and young-adult British subjectivity? What needs to be lost in order for metropolitan subj ectivity to be gained, it seems, is the savagery of boyhood. But insofar as Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin are always already civilized British subjects, this loss is really a foreclosure and, as such, a sort of Butlerian melancholic disavowal and introjection.

The Coral Island thus dramatizes and reveals the imbricated and mutually constitutive relations among gender and national belonging such that normative gender is produced in relation to racial otherness, and nationality is produced in relation to gendered otherness. In the novel, after all, metropolitan masculinity is produced by way of cross-racial imperial identification, and Britishness is produced by way of homoerotic male-male attachments. Judith Butler’s notions of heterosexual male subject formation and Renato Rosaldo’s notions of imperial nostalgia, when brought together, help to explain the relays between gender, race, and imperialism in Ballantyne’s novel. According to Butler’s notion of gender performativity, gender is neither natural nor given and, as such, is neither the inevitable result of biology nor a fixed, ahistorical, unchanging, cultural entity. Instead, gender is continuously produced and reproduced in any particular historical moment through performative acts and through the resultant iterative accretion of meaning. In the late twentieth-century United States, for example, Butler explains male normativity—that is, masculine heterosexuality—as the result of, what she terms, “heterosexual melancholia”:

the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love…. The straight man becomes (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he “never” loved and “never” grieved…. It is in this sense, then, that what is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal.40

Because of the prohibition against homosexuality, late twentieth-century heterosexual male subjectivity results from the foreclosure of the possibility of a male lover, a melancholic attachment to and thus introjection of that idealized male lover, and thus
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a performance of the self—of masculine heterosexual gender—
as a performance of
the never-loved and never-mourned lost male love object. In other words, Butler
explains, “what constitutes the sexually unperformable is performed instead as gender
identification.”

While Butler thus articulates the constitutive melancholia at the heart of
gender, Renato Rosaldo illustrates the constitutive nostalgia at the heart of
colonialism. Rosaldo explains what he terms “imperialist nostalgia” as colonialism’s
paradoxical double desire both to civilize and transform a society and simultaneously
to mourn the destruction and loss of that very society that colonialism necessarily
entails:

agents of colonialism…often display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it
was ‘traditionally’ (that is, when they first encountered it). The peculiarity of
their yearning, of course, is that agents of colonialism long for the very forms
of life they intentionally altered or destroyed…. Imperialist nostalgia revolves
around a paradox: A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim.

Insofar as Rosaldo’s mourning requires the destruction of a society and the
subsequent introjection of that loss as nostalgia into the heart of a colonial desire, and
thus insofar as we can see Rosaldo’s use of “mourning” in its everyday sense as
analogous to Butler’s use of “melancholia” in its psychoanalytic sense, we can see
Rosaldo’s imperialist nostalgia as a colonial counterpart to Butler’s heterosexual
melancholia.

In the context of Butler’s and Rosaldo’s formulations, and in light of the
eroticized power relations between Jack, Ralph, and Peterkin, and between the British
missionary and the boys, boy-on-boy as well as man-on-boy power relations and
white-on-white colonial relations in The Coral Island might thus be differently
understood through the following reformulation: what constitutes the sexually and
racialy unperformable is performed instead as gender, racial, and national
identification. Just as the male-male power relations of Ballantyne’s novel give way
to the normative masculinity and male-female erotic relations of adult life, so too does
the colonial savagery and racialized performance of boyhood give way to the
metropolitan civilization and national performance of British adulthood. Just as
identification with and introjection of the foreclosed male lover (foreclosed because
of the prohibition against male-male erotic relations) result in the performance of the
self as a performance of the other, so too does boyhood identification with and
introjection of the foreclosed racial other (foreclosed because a white British boy can
never be a nonwhite South Pacific Islander) result in the performance of the
metropolitan self as, paradoxically, a performance of the colonial other. Just as
Butler reveals male-male erotic attachments at the heart of male-female erotic
relations, I wish to reveal nonwhite colonial “savagery” at the heart of white
metropolitan “civilized” subjectivity.

While The Coral Island at first seems to be the epitome of escapist fiction—a
refuge for Victorian boys from the strictures of their upbringing as upright citizens, a
flight from the metropole to the far-flung imperial periphery—the acts of imperial
imagining that imbue the novel and propel the narrative are not escapist at all, but are
instead utterly constitutive of young Britons and thus utterly internal to the machinery
of metropolitan subject formation. Going native thus does not provide so much an escape from metropolitan subjectivity as an inauguration into it.
Notes:

8 Marx, *Capital*, 171.
12 Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) 199. Although in the nineteenth century the Rebellion is referred to as the Indian Mutiny, many historians and literary critics today, in an effort to employ more careful terminology, refer to the “Mutiny” instead as the Sepoy Rebellion. It is, after all, a group of sepoys, not all of India, who rise up against their British military officers. Moreover, “mutiny” suggests not simply rebellion, but rebellion specifically against legitimate authority rather than against exploitative and repressive colonial rule. I therefore take my lead from Mermin and Tucker and refer to this set of events as the Sepoy Rebellion. Mermin and Tucker, eds., *Victorian Literature 1830-1900*, 1107.
19 Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 210, my emphasis.
20 Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 212, my emphasis.
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22 One notable exception is Joseph Bristow’s reading of The Coral Island in Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man’s World. Bristow excitingly points out the ways in which “the idea of the savage…fluctuates so noticeably” at various places in The Coral Island. Bristow, however, is largely interested in showing the ways that Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin resemble “white savages,” as Ralph describes the pirates who abduct them for part of the novel, while I am interested in showing the ways in which the boys resemble South Pacific islanders. Bristow notes, “Pirates are those men who have degenerated from Western models of civilized behaviour, and yet…the boy heroes bear strong resemblances to them.” In my reading, I work to show the ways in which these boy heroes strongly resemble not white metropolitan men gone astray of British civilization, but the nonwhite colonial others themselves. Joseph Bristow, Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man’s World (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991) 107.

27 Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness, 212.
29 Hughes, Tom Brown’s Schooldays, 53.
30 Hughes, Tom Brown’s Schooldays, 57.
32 Even H. Rider Haggard, in his 1885 novel of African colonial adventure, King Solomon’s Mines, confirms in the opening pages the continued centrality of the all-male milieu well beyond the period of school: “I am going to tell the strangest story that I know of. It may seem a queer thing to say that, especially considering that there is no woman in it…. I can safely say that there is not a petticoat in the whole history.” Although the narrator protests that the absence of women constitutes a remarkable strangeness and queerness, the thoroughly woman-free nature of this history appears a necessary ingredient in the thrilling strangeness and simmering excitement of the story about to be told. H. Rider Haggard, King Solomon’s Mines 1885 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 8-9
35 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 86, Bhabha’s emphasis.
36 At one point late in the novel, Ralph is despondent about his lack of a Bible: “I had no doubt that the Bible would have given me much light and comfort on this subject, if I had possessed one, and I once more had occasion to regret deeply having neglected to store my memory with its consoling truths” (330).
41 Butler, “Critically Queer,” 236, Butler’s emphasis.