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Abominable Animals, Teachable Brutes, and the Wisest People on Earth: Settler Colonial Subjectivities in Gulliver's Voyage to the Houyhnhmns

Introduction

References to colonialism and imperialism abound in Book IV of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Alongside Swift's direct lampooning of travel writing throughout the novel sit clear references to European interactions with indigenous peoples as part of imperial expansion across the globe in the typical discursive mould of the day. There are many mentions of "savages", "Indians", "Americans" and "brutes" throughout the text. Indeed, the general language of civility and savagery that dictated the terms of engagement between European colonists/adventurers and indigenous peoples during the 'era of exploration' conspicuously populate Swift's satire.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the imperial context of *GT* suggests that the settler colonial disrupts monolithic categories of civility and savagery, drawing from both as a result of the anxiety of identity their interstitial position creates. Gulliver cannot reconcile himself to his status as a Yahoo with a "tincture of reason" because the categories of civility and savagery that he understands do not bend to accommodate such a hybrid, nor is such a notion tolerable to the Houyhnhms. It is argued here, then, that Swift depicts the colonial voyager as deeply and problematically affected by his time spent in a strange land and the text serves a scolding to the hubris of would be colonists and a warning of their potential fate. As neither perfectly rational nor entirely beastly, Gulliver cannot maintain his sanity in a land where the abstract European assumptions of civility and savagery are rendered concrete. Swift thus presents a stark warning of the perils of far-flung imperial adventure.

Literature Review

In the words of Edward Said, "Swift's work is a persisting miracle of how much commentary an author's writing can accommodate and remain problematic."¹ *Gulliver's Travels* is Swift's most enduring and accessible book, yet remains a hotbed of criticism and interpretation.² Book IV of the *Travels* is particularly divisive and continues to foster debate and interpretation.

These debates are invariably coloured by the individual readings of how Swift characterised the Houyhnhms and Yahoos. James L. Clifford provides the classic breakdown of the two predominant approaches to understanding Book IV as the "hard" and "soft" schools of criticism. The "hard" school sees the ultra-rational Houyhnhms as Swift's ideal society and the crude and brutish Yahoo as mankind at its most deplorable. The "soft" school, in turn, see the Houyhnhm as the true object of Swift's satire,

¹ Said, Edward, "Swift's Tory Anarchy", *The World, the Text and The Critic* (Cambridge, Harvard, 1983) p.54

² Hunter, J. Paul, "Gulliver's Travels and the Later writings" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, Fox, Christopher (ed.) (Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 2003) pp.31-47

representing a passionless and unattainable rationalism, with the Yahoo as a sub-rational beast whose distasteful nature is not to be held against him.³

Surveying postcolonial approaches to Book IV, the dominant interpretation is the “soft” school. These readings emphasise the repressive relationship between the Houyhnhmns and the Yahoos as the cause of the debased characteristics of the latter group. Characteristic of this group, Michael Wilding has argued that Book IV is a critique of British colonialism, seeing the Yahoos’ debasement as a result of their treatment as animals by their Houyhnhnm “slavemasters.”⁴ Building upon this, Anne Cline Kelly presents an argument relating to Swift’s perception of slavery and bondage expressed in his other writings wherein the “calculated strategy of oppression” pursued by the repressor over time renders the formerly rational Yahoo brutish.⁵ Wolfgang Zach argues that Swift’s position as an Anglo-Irish resulted in a “divided mind” on the topic of colonialism which necessarily feeds into his complex characterisation of distant lands, colonial adventurism, and foreign peoples across the four books of the *Travels*.⁶ Zach demonstrates Swift’s seeming ire at his self-described ‘exile’ as an Englishman in Ireland and his simultaneous defence of Ireland’s right to be free of English “enslavement.” This “bifocal” view, he argues, is characteristic of the Anglo-Irish. Indeed, Robert Mahoney’s observation that “Irish Protestants could view the British connection as indispensable and, simultaneously, as intolerably tyrannical”⁷ encapsulates the ambiguity that forms a key theme in the discourse of the settler colonial. However, Zach mitigates this useful conceptual framework by adopting the “soft” reading, arguing that the ambiguity of Swift’s own national position is resolved into a “spirit of liberty and anti-colonialism” in the *Travels*. This is tempered somewhat by a recognition of the emergence of the precariousness of his colonial condition in Gulliver’s identification with idealised slave-master Houyhnhmns, his classification as an enlightened Yahoo and his complicity in the degradation of the former.⁸ Nonetheless, Zach over-arching argument is that despite some internal conflict *GT* represents a reconciliation of Swift toward the cause of the oppressed native.

Afrin Zeenat argues that the cultural constitution of 18th Century Ireland, replete with colonial hybridity and heterogeneity, provided the background for Swift’s unstable portrayal of Gulliver’s identity. She positions Gulliver in between the Houyhnhmns and Yahoos, as Swift was between the English and Irish.⁹ In this regard, Swift’s “liminal subjectivity”, that is, the position of being “suspended between two acts of being”¹⁰, influences the characterisation of Gulliver. In particular, Gulliver’s situatedness between

³ Clifford’s overview of these approaches is well recounted in Sullivan, E.E., “Houyhnhmns and Yahoos: From Technique to Meaning” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol.24, No.3, 1984, pp.497-498

⁴ Wilding, Michael, “The Politics of Gulliver’s Travels” in Brissenden, R.F. (ed.) *Studies in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973) pp.202-322

⁵ Cline Kelly, Anne, “Swift’s Exploration of Slavery in Houyhnhmmland and Ireland”, *PMLA*, 91, 1976 p.846

⁶ Zach, Wolfgang, “Jonathan Swift and Colonialism”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol.26, no.1, 2000 pp.36-46

⁷ Mahoney, Robert, “The Irish Colonial Experience and Swift’s Rhetorics of Perception in the 1720s”, *Eighteenth Century Life*, Vol.22, No.1 (1998) p.71

⁸ Zach, Wolfgang, “Jonathan Swift and Colonialism” p.42

⁹ Zeenat, Afrin, Hybridity, Liminality, and Gulliver’s Travels: Swift’s Quest for his Cultural Identity”, *Literary Parritantra (Systems)* Vol.1, No.1&2, 2009 pp.92-193

¹⁰ Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 1995) pp.1-18

Houyhnhmn and Yahoo, Zeenat posits, foreshadows postcolonial literary discourse. Zeenat concludes that Swift proposes a hybrid of rational Houyhnhmn, debased Yahoo and prideful Gulliver as “a balanced individual who would have potential in the world.”¹¹ Such an argument, however, fails to take sufficient stock of Swift’s morose reading of human nature. Daniel Carey is correct in observing that at the conclusion of the Travels, as readers we are “left in a shadowy middle ground, uncertain of what, if anything, we should identify ourselves with.”¹² It is unclear how Zeenat’s contradictory and combustible mélange accommodates this dominant reading of Swift’s loathsome view of human nature. The postcolonial toolkit that she brings to the text, however, does open up the valuable notion of both Swift and Gulliver as possessed of an “interstitial position” between worlds.

Ultimately, it is problematically anachronistic to claim Swift as a humanitarian anti-colonialist. Beyond the issue of such a conceptual vocabulary simply not being available (or palatable had it been) to him at the time, the text simply does not support such a claim. The genuine rancour with which the Yahoos are presented renders them extremely unsympathetic from start to finish. The brutishness of the Yahoo is milked at every turn amidst Gulliver’s unwavering contempt for them. Gulliver’s reactions of horror to the Yahoos are perhaps deliberately overplayed in order to generate the satirical comedy of the the big reveal where he discovers his similarity to them, but never are the Yahoos redeemed nor are such potentially hyperbolic moments rescinded. The satire can accommodate criticising the delusional pride of Gulliver and those who think humanity is capable of a Houyhnhmn-like state without having to call for it to also see the Yahoos as innocent of Gulliver’s charges against them. The “soft” readings are far too keen to locate in *GT* a prescient foreshadowing of the Enlightenment call to a common berth of humanity. Swift’s expression of a clear preference for civility over savagery generates a universalism that unquestionably looks down upon the Yahoo and their ilk, not a call for its inclusion in a unified humanity. Whilst the human capacity for reason marks us apart from beasts, we can descend down toward such levels, as Gulliver threatens to so, opting to lose his mind instead it seems.

The toolkit provided by postcolonial analysts, however, is useful in understanding how Gulliver’s fate represents a warning by Swift of the dangers of the colonial endeavour. In particular, I will argue that the question of constructing ‘indigeneity’, which has subsequently become a key theme in settler colonial literatures of the New World¹³, guides Gulliver’s relationship to the Yahoo and Houyhnhmn in Book IV. Gulliver is simultaneously loathsome toward the Yahoo, in awe of the Houyhnhmn, and deeply aware of his own failings to match either. His imperfect rationality places him beneath the Houyhnhmns yet above the Yahoos, whilst still an imperfect and maladjusted physical specimen compared to the Yahoos of Houyhnhmnland. In this regard, we see that Gulliver is in a state of permanent flux between identities and worlds. The fear of the debasement to native status that may come with the necessity of indigenisation weighs heavily on the This avoids the assumption of

¹¹ Zeenat, Hybridity, Liminality, and Gulliver’s Travels pp.95; 102

¹² Carey, Daniel, “Swift, Gulliver and Human Nature” in *Les Voyages de Gulliver: Mondes Lointains ou Monde Proches, Boulaire, Francois & Carey, Daniel* (eds.) (Caen, Press Universitaire de Caen, 2002)

¹³ Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London, routledge, 1994) pp.135-145

the two monolithic worlds of 'Old' and 'New' that even postcolonial approaches to Swift have not shaken off of the settler colonial and Swift presents such fears in both Gulliver's narration and the Houyhnhmn tradition of the origins of the Yahoo in their territory. Thus, this is a "hard" reading, in that the Yahoos are unquestionably foul and the rationality of the Houyhnhmns places them in a league far beyond human capability, representing an unattainable paragon. *GT* represents a warning of the dangers of colonialism but does so not in "a spirit of liberty" for oppressed native peoples but with the sanity of colonials in mind.

Theoretical Framework

Settler colonial theory prioritizes the particularities of subjectivity and identity formation that goes with the establishment of a political order away from an imperial centre. "Settler are *founders* of political orders and carry their sovereignty with them," fashioning a new society in between the originating word and the indigenous territory that they conquest.¹⁴ A key idea in settler colonial theory is that the settler sits between the Old and New Worlds of the imperial endeavour. Veracini describes the dominant players as "the settler coloniser, the indigenous colonised, and a variety of differently categorised exogenous alterities."¹⁵ Swift's playful disruption of the monolithic categories of coloniser and colonised that defined imperial discourse in his time relates to such an expansive reasserting of the colonial framework along settler lines. No doubt, Swift's own subjectivity and experience as "an Englishman born in Ireland" contributed to such a disposition.¹⁶

As Alan Lawson notes, the settler occupies a space in between the Manichaean classificatory system of 'Old' and 'New' world. The settler is not physically or metaphysically in the homeland nor is he in the world of the native but exists 'between' these two competing 'first' worlds.¹⁷ Slemon views the traditional academic exclusion of the settler subject from the sphere of postcolonialism as a reflection of the "binarism of Europe and its Others, of coloniser and colonised, of the West and the Rest, of the vocal and the silent."¹⁸ However, outside of this bilateral understanding lies another perspective of the colony as a majority society fused together of elements from both worlds. Arguably no other product of the legacy of European imperialism and colonisation features postcolonial hybridity as such a defining characteristic. Equally so, the concept of colonial mimicry¹⁹, traditionally depicted from the Western point of view as the fate of the colonised, is all too apparent in the actions of the settler. This, of course, assumes the existence of monolithic and freestanding entities of two worlds, "Old" and "New", which Swift will severely undermine in the *Travels*.

Although the colonist brought with it to new territories the language and territorial understanding of empire, this was now distributed via a translation of the European in a non-European setting – the gulf of time, space and experience providing the basis of

¹⁴ Veracini, Lorenzo, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New , Palgrave MacMillan, 2010)

¹⁵ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* p.16

¹⁶ Zach, Wolfgang, "Jonathan Swift and Colonialism" p.42

¹⁷ Lawson, 'Postcolonial Theory and the "Settler" Subject' pp.20-22

¹⁸ Slemon, Stephen, 'Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World' *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990) p.34

¹⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* p.12

translation. So far from their originating environment of Europe the languages of behaviour and understanding of the settler could no longer operate in the exact form that they had come about. Thus, prior to the materialisation of even the most primordial foundations of various settler national identities, the colonial settler never genuinely represented the actuality of the people or empire in whose name and values it colonised. Far from the originating world of the imperium, the settler can but mimic its values and acts. Once again, Swift demonstrates an awareness of such processes, yet also subverts them by having Gulliver mimic extremes of both civility and savagery as he forms the distinct identity of the settler.

A process of conscious and often exaggerated iteration (and subsequently reiteration) of European identity emerges as an attempt to cope with the emergence of a hybrid identity. Such reiteration is always through the prism of dislocation and as a result is not a reproduction but a translation. Thus began the twofold process of mimicry of both 'First' worlds between which the settler subject found itself. This dual mimicry illustrates the syncretism of the settler experience as two 'first' worlds in a constant state of fusion provided the backbone to life in the colony. Lawson argues that in settler cultures "mimicry is a necessary and unavoidable part of the repertoire of the settler."²⁰ The result of this combinative process of dual mimicry constitutes a classic example of postcolonial hybridity.

A hallmark of the settler colonial subjectivity is what we may call the legitimacy deficit, wherein settlers who are looking to make a new territory their own must face up to the intrusive nature of their presence in a new territory and the challenge to this from the primordial legitimacy of its native inhabitants. Terry Goldie sums up this paradigm through a lens of what he calls "indigenisation", wherein the settler reappropriates the characteristics of the native and constructs a narrative through which he conquers the often difficult and unforgiving terrain of the land. Goldie defines this process as "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous." This is a tool designed to cultivate psychological legitimacy in response to the presence of native people contradicting settler narratives of belonging in the territory. Goldie describes the meeting of a Canadian settler with an indigenous person:

*The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?*²¹

This neatly describes the legitimacy deficit that is inherent in all settler societies in relation to the land. As such, legitimating narratives centred on the settler's hardship and labour are crafted – the settler never dispossess but "wrestles with the land to sustain

²⁰ Lawson, 'Postcolonial Theory and the "Settler" Subject' p.24-26

²¹ Goldie, Terry, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures* (Montreal; McGill Queen's University Press, 1990) p.12-14

his family.”²² Robert L. Nelson describes this as the “anti-conquest narrative: the desire by the coloniser to justify their action.”²³ Certainly such narrative processes are evident in the Houyhnhmn discourse in relation to the Yahoos. As we shall later see, for some of the Houyhnhmns the fate of the Yahoo species is linked to their strength of their claim to legitimacy in this land.

A developed theoretical conceptualisation of the colonial in a foreign land presents a framework through which to understand how and why Gulliver reacts to the Houyhnhmns and Yahoos as he does. Swift utilises caricatures of the primordial identities presented by the European imperialism to critique of the hubris behind such assumptions as well as a warning of the negative consequences to those who venture to far-flung lands.

Settler Subjectivity and the “Voyage to the Houyhnhmns”

One of the key puzzles underlying the characterization of the Yahoos in *Gulliver’s Travels* is the fluctuation in their relationship to the narrative anchor, the main character Gulliver.

The dynamic dictating the manner in which Gulliver addressed this plurality of relations to our seemingly debased species members, I argue, is best understood by seeing Gulliver’s presence in Houyhnhmnland as explicitly imperial. A considerable part of the text directly or indirectly engages the imperial and colonial context in which the book was written and thus a colonial reading is an appropriate means through which to draw out the core conceptual inconsistencies in Swift’s satire. As Terry Eagleton notes, the Anglo-Irish possessed the “unstable blend of arrogance and insecurities of a second-class governing class.”²⁴ Rawson views this as materializing in the likes of Swift’s dislike of his metropolitan masters (in this case England) “not for their treatment of native subjects but for an alleged betrayal of the *colons* themselves.”²⁵ The persistence of such feelings of alienation from the colonial metropole amidst disgust at the character of native inhabitants forms a key aspect of the interstitial subjectivity of the settler colonial. The multidirectional nature of Swift’s satire and the occasionally unclear target of his primary ire corresponds to such an inherent ambiguity toward the colonial process. That Swift presents the Yahoo as both a metaphor for humanity but also a clearly demeaning stereotype of the typical colonial native, allows him to have his cake and eat it too, as it were. In this regard, Swift and Gulliver display the singular subjectivity of settler ambiguity.

When they are first presented, the Yahoos are depicted as resolutely bestial, a foul, monstrous sub-savage being that lead Gulliver to conclude that he had never seen “so disagreeable an Animal, or one against which I naturally conceived so strong an antipathy.”²⁶ The immediate revulsion with which Gulliver greets the Yahoo marks the

²² Pels, Peter, “The Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History and the Emergence of Western Governmentality”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol 26, 1997, pp.171-174; Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* p.14

²³ Nelson, Robert L., “Emptiness in the Colonial Gaze: Labour, Property and Nature”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 79, Spring 2011, p.167

²⁴ Eagleton, Terry, “A Spot of Firm Government”, *London Review of Books*, Vol.23, No. 16, 2001 pp.19-20

²⁵ Rawson, Claude, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492-1945* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001) p41

²⁶ Swift, Jonathan, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Rawson, Claude (ed.) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008) p.209

species out as particularly rancorous. The Yahoos live up to Gulliver's initial gut reaction with aplomb by climbing the tree next to him and attempting to defecate down onto him. Gulliver is rescued from this nasty scene by the horse people, the Houyhnhmns whom, after an initial depiction as physically animal-like, quickly shock and awe Gulliver through behaviour that was "orderly and rational, so acute and judicious", rendering him immediately taken with them.²⁷ The initial presentation of the Yahoo as the embodiment of a lowly life form is thus brought into further relief by their contrast with the Houyhnhmns.

Swift is certainly intentionally presenting a hyperbolic contrast in Gulliver's base reactions to his initial meetings with the Yahoos and Houyhnhmns. Indeed, a clear goal of the satire is not just to depict the two extremes of debasement and rationalism, but also Gulliver's prideful and simplistic reactions to the embodiment of both extremes. This introduces Swift's disruption of the typical colonial structure of two monolithic stereotyped groups of 'civility' and 'savagery.' Located between these two extremes and wholeheartedly acknowledging their absurdities, Gulliver is inherently foolish, susceptible and disposed to caricaturing the 'Other'.

Swift thus raises a characteristically colonial dilemma for Gulliver, and the imperial project more broadly. As Gulliver stays longer in Houyhnhmnland he learns more about both the Yahoos and Houyhnhmns and is forced to reconcile new knowledge with primordial encounters that have generated entrenched understandings of who and what is civil and savage in this land. Most problematically, he himself is situated between these two essentialist positions and left wholly anxious as to his identity as a result. In this regard, the settler colonial narrative of forging legitimacy amidst a foreign land and appropriating native traits in order to do so resonates here. It is then further deepened by Gulliver's fears of the potential of his own descent to Yahoo status should he stay in the territory.

Later when Gulliver is taken back to a Houyhnhmn dwelling for closer inspection as a Yahoo who appears to possess some attributes of reason, the Houyhnhmn 'Master' who becomes Gulliver's sponsor in the community has this rational Yahoo compared to one of the indigenous Yahoos:

The Beast and I were brought close together; and our Countenances diligently compared, both by Master and Servant, who thereupon repeated several Times the word Yahoo. My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure.

We are thus led to see that Gulliver, as the stand-in for all of humanity, is in fact just as loathsome and detestable as the "filthy Yahoos."; they are one and the same.²⁸

Gulliver oscillates in his ability to accept this 'fact', and throughout the remainder of the tale, positions himself and the Yahoos in a multiplicity of positions in relation to both the Houyhnhmns and humanity more generally. Gulliver is taken under the wing of his Master, who is fascinated by the presence of a Yahoo whose "Teachableness, Civility and Cleanliness" rendered him a cut above the average Yahoo, who in his words are "the

²⁷ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* p.211

²⁸ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* p.214-215

most unteachable of all Brutes.”²⁹ The notion of a teachable brute ascending the ladder from savage to civil conjures up the opposite journey from civil to savage, one which Gulliver has already embarked upon. Swift seems to be telling us that that which can be improved, can also be corrupted or degenerated. This is the warning to those who take their civility into parts unknown.

Gulliver takes a bizarre pride in the attribution of even a modicum of rationality to him by his Master and graciously embraces their student-pupil relationship. As the Master grows closer to him, Gulliver pleads not to be called a Yahoo by him any more as he cannot stand being linked to a creature that he holds in absolute contempt. This represents an attempt to disavow the previously accepted and seemingly undeniable physical similarities between himself and the Yahoo.

Swift pointedly conveys Gulliver’s difficulty in accepting his (and by extension humanity’s) place in the world as he continues to detest what appear to be indisputably his fellow species. The time spent in Houyhnhmmland and the contact with its wildly divergent peoples has grated upon Gulliver’s sanity, and his position between these monolithic groups is deeply uncomfortable for the imperial narrative that brought him to this far-flung place.

Later in the text, however, Gulliver slips into an unheralded and unexplained consistency in portraying both himself and his fellow Europeans as Yahoos. When attempting to escape Houyhnhmmland on a raft, Gulliver sees Portuguese sailors and is horrified at the prospect of dealing with “European Yahoos.” When he is forced to engage the Portuguese, he introduces himself to the sailors as “a poor Yahoo, banished from the Houyhnhmns.”³⁰ Gulliver has thus entirely reversed in his previous attempts to deny any connection between himself and the Yahoos and now he even attributes the debased character of the Yahoos he has encountered in Houyhnhmmland to his originating European world.

When Gulliver attends the General Assembly of the Houyhnhms, the topic of exterminating the Yahoos arises. This section is particularly notable as it contains a short but interesting discussion of the origins of the Yahoos in Houyhnhmmland. We are presented with a subtly complex subversion of the norms of the colonial narrative. Swift undercuts the primacy and essentialism of the ‘native’ and ‘settler’ by having the Houyhnhmn display behaviour in keeping with civil rationalism, yet the indigenous character of the Yahoo is questioned, thus presented them as potential foreign settler-invaders. The arguments in favour of exterminating the Yahoos primarily predicate upon the generally odious and filthy character of the species, but one speaker raises the point of the Yahoos’ lack of indigenous status in Houyhnhmmland as grounds for their removal:

*He took notice of a general Tradition, that Yahoos had not been always in their Country: But, that many Ages ago, two of these Brutes appeared together upon a Mountain, whether produced by the Heat of the Sun upon corrupted Mud and Slime, or from the Ooze and froth of the Sea, was never known. That these Yahoos engendered, and their Brood, in a short time grew as numerous as to overrun and infest the whole nation.*³¹

²⁹ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* p.218;219

³⁰ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* p.267

³¹ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* p.252

This passage represents a fascinating duality of colonial discourses. According to this argument, the lack of legitimacy regarding their presence in the territory marks out the Yahoos as recipients of legitimate violence and even extermination. The true doublehandedness of this, of course, is that in settler colonial situations the primary architects of violence were the non-native settlers, something Swift knew all too well living in Ireland, however justified he may have thought the 'raising up' of the native Irish population to be. Whilst denial of the validity of indigenous claims to the territory is a key aspect of settler colonial national narratives³², it certainly does not appear that Swift intended any outright presentation of the Houyhnhmns as a colonising force. Their brutality toward the Yahoos, however wretched they may be, does summon up images of European violence in the New World.³³ In the first respect, the Houyhnhmn tradition constitutes a means to assert their community's specific legitimacy to the territory and a firm denial of any form of primordial relationship between the Yahoo and the land in question.

By denying the Yahoos this legitimacy, their candidacy for extermination is rendered acceptable. Indeed, the tradition presents a logic wherein a certain synergetic relationship with the land is required in order to be truly indigenous to a territory. The lack of such a relationship, again, presents a ground upon which removal from this territory was justified, and in accordance with natural law:

*Those Creatures could not be Ylnhniamshy (or Aborigines of the Land) because of the violent Hatred the Houyhnhmns as well as other animals bore them; which although their evil Disposition sufficiently deserved, could never have arrived at so high a degree if they had been Aborigines, or else they would have long since been rooted out.*³⁴

As Patrick Wolfe writes, "Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element." As such, we can see how legitimacy *vis-a-vis* the land is used to deny the right to life of the Yahoos. This summons Wolfe's argument that "settler colonialism is inherently eliminatory."³⁵ Swift playfully imagines the removal of the Yahoo from Houyhnhmnland without ever outright condemning it or advancing a clear case in their defence. This ambiguity again marks Swift's colonial discourse out as notably ambiguous and possessed of the liminal subjectivity of the settler. This is particularly evident in that the monolithic categories of coloniser and colonised are undermined or at least questioned by the idea of the 'savage' coming to colonise the land of the 'civilised.' This further demonstrates how Swift characterises Gulliver as having lost his sense of internal legitimacy as a result of his own break from the tangible markers of his originating society and his inability to derive legitimacy in Houyhnhmnland from his position between the two groups there.

³² Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* p.95

³³ Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide* pp.17-24

³⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* p.253-254

³⁵ Wolfe, Patrick, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native", *Journal of Genocide Research* Vol.8, No.4, 2006 pp.387-388

Swift's own nascent Protestant Irish identity was developed on such a tenuous basis as he both reviled the native Irish and yet also defiantly and effectively pamphleteered on behalf of Irish rights (albeit within an Ireland dominated by the Protestant settler ruling class.)³⁶ These two conflicting points converge in the contribution of Gulliver's Master to this debate at the general assembly. Gulliver's Master approved of the aforementioned Tradition and adds to the debate that the original Yahoos in Houyhnhmmland were not of such a debased nature but that the species degenerated over time:

*the two Yahoos said to be first seen among them, had to be driven thither over the sea; that coming to Land, and being forsaken by their Companions, they retired to the Mountains, and degenerating by Degrees, became in the process of Time, much more savage than those of their Species in the Country from whence these two Originals came.*³⁷

It appears, then, that the original Yahoo presence in Houyhnhmmland was not of an entirely brutish disposition, but developed as such over time. It is notable that these original Yahoos had travelled across the sea and been forsaken by their companions, just as Gulliver had. We are left with a strong suspicion that the Yahoos are of European origin. The fact that the Yahoos changed over time from their original sighting in Houyhnhmmland to their debasement generations later summons the discourse of indigenisation – the adoption of native traits in the effort to survive in a strange land. Jack P. Greene has noted that contemporary accounts of settlers in 18th Century British discourse contained a marked fear of such a seemingly necessary or unavoidable social deviation away from metropolitan norms by colonial adventurers. Settlers were thus seen as hugely at risk of the type of degeneration Swift catalogues in the Houyhnhmn discussions of the origins of the Yahoos.³⁸

It is interesting that Swift inserts a particularly colonialist tinge to the Houyhnhmn discourse here when it appears as though the Yahoos might be a colonising force after-all. Swift has entirely warped the typical binary relationship of the coloniser and the colonised, opting instead for a fluid and dynamic plural hybrid wherein the colonisers progressively degenerate upon arrival in the new world and are held as subservient slaves by the 'original' inhabitants. This casts the historical narrative of European colonialism on its head. Most significantly, Swift offers a warning to all would-be colonisers that they are liable to end up not only debased by their presence in a foreign land, but also the slaves of other races present in the territory.

The Houyhnhmn tradition that speaks of the degeneration of the Yahoos over time represents a stark psychological fear of the settler colonial in the face of the necessity of indigenisation. Gulliver wishes to avoid a similar fate, yet is simultaneously forced to admit to both himself and to the Houyhnhmns that he is a Yahoo: "it was easy to apply the Character (...) of the Yahoos to myself and my Countrymen", and must cling to small

³⁶ Zach, Wolfgang, "Jonathan Swift and Colonialism" p.42

³⁷ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* p.254

³⁸ Greene, Jack P., *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.51

and seemingly arbitrary lines of differentiation such as his clothing and his “tincture of reason.”³⁹ Such small differences become increasingly important as Gulliver spends more time in Houyhnhmmland and away from his originating world and its web of significance. The fact that Gulliver wears clothes presents an important facet of his differentiation from the ‘local’ Yahoo population. Swift uses this to satirise the arbitrary and fleeting distinction between civility and savagery. Gulliver clings to remaining clothed as a hallmark of his identity, even making use of Yahoo skins and hair to maintain his modesty after his original clothes wear out. This keeps him differentiated from the indigenous Yahoos but also serves to provide an illusionary cloak to hide how similar to them he truly is. In this regard, we see that Gulliver’s colonial identity as a subject from a different world yet far from home is predicated on maintaining certain facets of his originating world. It also shows how disposable and thin the distinctions between seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum of civility and savagery are.

The need of the colonist to become indigenous to acclimatize to the new world is counteracted by the need to maintain and assert the important markers of differentiation that renders true indigenisation impossible. The need to indigenise is starkly presented before Gulliver in his unsuitability to the land. In conversation with his Master, Gulliver must humiliatingly accept his failings in comparison to the local Yahoos:

I had neither the Strength or Agility of a common Yahoo; that I walked infirmly on my hinder feet; had found a Contrivance to make my Claws of no Use or Defence, and to remove the Hair from my Chin, which was intended as a shelter from the Sun and the weather. Lastly, that I could neither run speed, nor climb trees like my brethren (as he called them) the Yahoos in this country.

This admission forces Gulliver to perform his differentiation to the Houyhnhmns through whatever means necessary. Gulliver does so by using body parts (skin, hair etc.) of Yahoos in the construction of his new shoes and clothes when his own wear away, and also in the making of the raft that facilitates his escape from Houyhnhmmland. It is necessary for him to display to the master race Houyhnhmn that facile physical similarities will not prevent him from treating Yahoos as they do. That Gulliver will stoop to such wretchedly dehumanizing measures to maintain his position above the indigenous Yahoos despite his pained admission of his fraternity with them and their superiority over him in certain key areas demonstrates the specific subjectivity of the settler colonial. This represents a warning concerning the acts potentially required of colonial voyagers like Gulliver and also the effects they will have on their sanity.

On the other side of this relationship, Gulliver’s awe of the Houyhnhmns and his frank recognition of his (and his people’s) failure to meet their level of rationality results in a classic example of what Albert Memmi called “colonial mimicry.” This mimicry is an admission and endorsement on behalf of the colonised of the coloniser’s superior strength and character.⁴⁰ Gulliver’s self-loathing in the face of Houyhnhmn perfection leads him to attempt the pyrrhic mimicry of their character:

³⁹ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* p.241

⁴⁰ Memmi, Albert, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York, Orion Press, 1965) p.119-124

By conversing with the Houyhnhmns, and looking upon them with Delight, I fell to imitate their Gait and Gesture, which is now grown into a Habit; and my friends often tell me in a blunt way, that I trot like a Horse; which however, I take for a great compliment: Neither shall I disown, that in speaking I am apt to fall into the voice and manner of Houyhnhmns, and hear myself ridiculed on that Account without the least Mortification.

Swift thus presents man's hubris as encapsulated by Gulliver's pathetic affection of the most trivial and surface-level facets of the rational Houyhnhnm. Homi Bhabha presents colonial mimicry as a form of resistance to colonial power. The sheer inability of the colonised to reproduce Western norms with any epistemological authenticity forms a covert undercutting of the basis of imperial order.⁴¹ In this context, Swift utilises Gulliver's mimicry as a deepening of his satiric presentation of the unadulterated worship of the extreme rationalism of the Houyhnhmn outlook. This satire assumes a broad swipe that ultimately disrupts the core relationality of the colonial order. This swipe does nonetheless come amidst the depiction of the Yahoos and imperial adventurism in general that critically satirises yet also perpetuates the imperialistic discourse of the era.⁴²

Gulliver is driven into the subjectivity of the settler colonial, wherein the liminal perspective of drawing upon both constituent worlds for core facets of one's identity creates a friction wherein the settler can bitterly relate to both colonials and natives. Thus, the extremes here are presented as both problematic in various guises. Gulliver remains fundamentally a Yahoo, but one whose reason and clothing marks him as different. He hates the Yahoos and self-loathes for his base similarities to them. His admiration for the Houyhnhmns is tinged by his inability to ever be truly accepted into their world, sleeping in a stable outside the Houyhnhmn house but also away from the Yahoo's pen. In the end, Gulliver must escape Houyhnhmnland or be killed as an aberration that sits uncomfortably between the extremes of its society; the ultra-rational Houyhnhmns cannot tolerate the imperfectly rational man.

The settler colonial subjectivity that skirts such boundaries in search of a composite identity that can claim indigenous legitimacy explains the multiple and conflicting discussions of Yahoo, Houyhnhmn and human in the *Travels*. Gulliver, of course, fails to achieve such a composite and lives out the rest of his days in England continuing to mimic the Houyhnhmn by trotting and neighing surrounded by European Yahoos that disgust him.

The *Travels'* portrayal of hyperbolic colonial extremes and its wider satire of a universally miserable human nature disrupts the solid basis upon which typical colonial narratives are drawn. Swift's basis as an Anglo-Irish may have meant that even his basic empathies with native Yahoos could not escape the traditional trapping of imperialistic binaries of civility and savagery in language. But to end the assessment there is to exclude much of the critical significance of Swift's commentary on both the peoples involved in imperial relationships and the acts required of them. Terry Eagleton is correct in arguing that "Swift detested the Catholic Yahoos he obliquely championed," envying the primordial legitimacy that such natives enjoy whilst decrying their wild and "odious"

⁴¹ Ball, John Clement, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York, Routledge, 2003) pp.36-28

⁴² Hawes, Clement, "Three Times Around the Globe: Colonial Discourse", *Cultural Critique*, Vol.18, 1991 pp.187-214

ways.⁴³ Unquestionably Book IV of *GT* undermines the totality of iron-clad colonial categories of settler and native by digging at the prideful delusion that underlies such thinking. However, it also contains clear and seemingly genuine loathing for practices such as uncleanliness, brutishness, and a lack of order that were seen as distinctly native. The true hubris, Swift seems to say, is in assuming that the civil European is not equally capable of these traits as the savage. Imperial adventure and the settlement of new lands threaten to leave all with Gulliver's fate, liminally situated between monolithic worlds, insecure of their identity and warped to the point of madness.

Conclusion

Swift was well aware that the monolithic categories assumed by European imperial thinking would dangerously melt away when far from the originating society. The depiction of Gulliver's relationships between the extreme paragons of civility and savagery in Houyhnhmmland show that the civility of European society does not preclude its descent to savagery in the company of savages. Gulliver embodies the essential problem of humanity in that the possession of reason renders us superior to beasts, but this is never total as it is for the Houyhnhmns and savage traits can be unleashed under the right (or wrong) circumstances. Gulliver's position between the savage and civil serves as a warning to what awaits imperial adventurers outside of the ordering structures of European society. His mind is weakened by the uncertainty that his status as a semi-rational Yahoo brings, finally succumbing to total madness. As humans are neither resolutely beastly nor entirely rational, we must tread carefully away from organised society into the grey area between our opposing tendencies; we can descend to savagery and our imperfect reason cannot be tolerated by an ultra-rational society. Engaging these extremes comes at high cost to those prideful enough to do so.

⁴³ Eagleton, Terry, "A Spot of Firm Government" pp.19-20

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