



Educating the Mainland Public: Imperial Boosterism and the Puerto Rican Image in Children's Adventure Literature

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Abstract

This research focuses on one example of young adult literature, *Young Hunters in Porto Rico; or, the Search for a Lost Treasure*, published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate immediately following the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Imperialistic adventure novels like *Young Hunters in Porto Rico* coincided with the U.S. implementation of the doctrine of Americanization, or the American colonial mission to instruct Puerto Ricans in self-government and democratic values in anticipation for some uncertain future form of economic and political sovereignty for the island. Edward Stratemeyer built his vast fiction empire, the publishing house for such series as *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*, upon imperial romances which glorified the events of the Spanish-American War and presented recently-acquired U.S. territories—such as Puerto Rico—as sites of adventure beyond mainland confines to a predominately male, teenage audience. Borrowing from an English literary tradition, these novels energized young, white, American men to act as willing participants in the imperial imagination while simultaneously instilling in them expectations for Puerto Rican behavior and identity.

Keywords: Puerto Rico, American Children's Literature, U.S. Empire

Introduction

As Martin Green (1979) states in his influential text *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, “adventure” acted as the “energizing myth of empire” in imperialistic literature (p. xi).

Imperialist adventure narratives instilled in their reader the energy and desire to “go out into the world and explore, conquer, and rule” (Green, 1979, p. 3). Following in the tradition of the imperialist British literature which Green examines, American children's adventure stories published during and after the Spanish-American War presented the newly-acquired U.S. territories as sites of intrigue, adventure, and daring exploits beyond mainland confines. As this paper will explore, these novels coached an audience consisting primarily of young, white, mainland men on their participatory role in the imperial imagination while simultaneously instilling expectations for Puerto Rican behavior and identity.

The masculine characters present in these examples of young adult literature act as surrogates for the “aggressively insurgent manhood” of the era which, as embodied by Rough Rider-in-Chief Theodore Roosevelt, matched a period of aggressive expansion in the scope of U.S. empire

(Watts, 2003, p. 2). Physical self-discipline, violent pursuits, and “fantasy and emotionalism” defined Rooseveltian masculinity, character traits codified by images of the Rough Rider and the “cowboy soldier” (Watts, 2003, p. 2). These adventure novels lent young male readers the opportunity to participate in imperial fantasies, “escape the confining bonds of civilization,” and participate in the “imagined fraternity” of energetic manhood (Watts, 2003, p. 11). This “unapologetically imperialist” flavor of American masculinity is given literary form in the 1900 adventure novel *Young Hunters in Porto Rico*, the nucleus of which is a ragtag group of young, Rooseveltian men (Watts, 2003, p. 240).

Mass-Market Children’s Literature and Edward Stratemeyer’s “Fiction Factory”

Penned under the pseudonym Captain Ralph Bonehill, *Young Hunters in Porto Rico* opens with an encounter between the members of the Gun and Sled Gang—a group of adventure-seeking, big-game-hunting young men in possession of a yacht and a seemingly endless supply of capital—and an English treasure hunter shipwrecked after a recent hurricane off of the Florida coast. The Englishman tells the boys of his competition with a rival over a cache of treasure allegedly located in Puerto Rico and invites the gang to accompany him on an expedition to the island to find untold riches. In *Young Hunters*, this passing of the torch from a weakened Englishman to a group of young, active American men echoes the burgeoning external U.S. empire staging longstanding traditions of British imperialism. Additionally, this transfer from one imperial power to the next is evidenced by the book’s own genre, as the form of the children’s adventure novel draws inspiration from the tradition of English novelists who used adventure as a means to laud and normalize empire. According to historian Brian Rouleau (2008), the U.S. acquisition of territories after the Spanish-American War indicated to the Stratemeyer Syndicate—the vast publishing empire responsible for the Gun and Sled Gang series, among thousands of other children’s books—that American children were primed for novels similar to those which had instilled “imperialistic pride” in young British audiences (p. 482). As stated by Peter Hugill (1999), these early novels first taught an audience of teenage boys that the young American empire “was a junior partner in the Anglo-Saxon compact” under the imperial tutelage of the British (p. 319). By World War I, these imperial adventures conveyed the narrative that the United States was now an “equal on the world stage” with the potential to eclipse a waning British Empire (Hugill, 1999, p. 319).

As publisher of such successful and beloved children's book series as *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*, the Stratemeyer Syndicate's mass-market children's literature acts as a window onto the expansion of consumer culture at the dawn of the 20th century. During a period when industrialization saw the expansion of the middle class and the new potential of expendable income for many, prolific author and publisher Edward Stratemeyer was one of the first magnates in the United States to realize the consumer power of young people. Stratemeyer first established his writing career through the publication of adventure stories in young men's literary magazines before writing anywhere from 11 to 18 books under author Horatio Alger's name, foreshadowing the later system Stratemeyer used as a publishing magnate (Donelson, 1978, p.18). Alger's immensely popular subject matter—stories of hardscrabble young men achieving a higher class status through discipline, hard work, and pluck—additionally portends the rugged Yankee determination of the Alger-esque characters in Stratemeyer's own novels (Donelson, 1978, p. 18). Stratemeyer's career finally broke in 1898, when his editor suggested that one of his generic war novels be rewritten about Admiral George Dewey's recent naval victory in the Philippines. *Dewey at Manila* launched Stratemeyer's massively successful Spanish-American War-themed *Old Glory* series, setting the stage for his later adventure stories and forming the Stratemeyer Syndicate's foundation of "early imperial romances" (Hugill, 1999, p. 328).

With the breakthrough of these imperial adventure novels, the Stratemeyer Syndicate solidified. Like a master artist's workshop, Stratemeyer gave freelance writers three-page overviews for novels while maintaining ultimate creative control, dictating character types and plots with step-by-step outlines (Donelson, 1978, pp. 23 – 24). To obscure the reality of his syndicate's vast monopoly and create the "illusion" of competition, Stratemeyer used pennames, such as Captain Ralph Bonehill in the case of *Young Hunters* (Hugill, 1999, p. 328). In order to obscure Stratemeyer's monopolized grip on children's literature, these hired authors relinquished their rights to the texts and swore to never reveal that they had written under a pseudonym for the syndicate.

Although Stratemeyer found further success in the 1910s with the *Tom Swift* series, educators, teachers, and school librarians opposed his books and deemed them "trash" with little of substance to challenge young readers (Donelson, 1978, p. 39). Established in 1908, the Boy Scouts of America made a concerted effort to publish low cost, BSA-endorsed classics in

response to Stratemeyer's immense success with teenage boys. In opposition to cheap, mass-market series like *Tom Swift* and the *Rover Boys*, BSA reprinted books such as Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas*, determining these classic novels to be equal parts entertaining and enriching (Donelson, 1978, p. 34). However, Stratemeyer's outspoken critics did little to impede the syndicate's sales or the future longevity of series such as *Nancy Drew*.

Like Horatio Alger's stories of success and upward mobility through the determination and honest character of improverished young men, Stratemeyer's series similarly sought to instill certain values in a young readership with moralizing tales. Literary scholar Ken Donelson (1978) formulated that the Stratemeyer Syndicate's novels specifically imparted eight main lessons to its young readership: a Protestant work ethic; the Godliness of proper manly pursuits and a warning against vice; Yankee determination; the value of athleticism and education; the benefits of being outdoors; the lack of a gray area between the opposed forces of Good and Evil; respect for authority; and America's status as a land of opportunity (p. 41). However, historian Peter Hugill (1999) adds one more point to Donelson's blueprint, and asserts that another ubiquitous moral aspect to Stratemeyer's novels is the underlying assumption of "America's moral right to world power" (p. 328). Where traditional classroom settings may have failed to impart overt lessons in imperial manhood, Stratemeyer's massively successful moralizing tales for teenage boys did plenty to pick up the slack.

Young Hunters in Porto Rico and Imperial Ventriloquism

According to Stratemeyer's own accounts of the sheer volume of his fan mail, his young audience felt encouraged to actively participate in his adventure narratives beyond the scope of the books themselves. In the preface to *Young Hunters*, "Bonehill" (1900) asserts that this addition to the *Gun and Sled Gang* series "has been written at the earnest solicitation of my [Stratemeyer's/Bonehill's] readers" (pp. iii-iv). As Rouleau (2008) confirms, the Stratemeyer Syndicate received thousands upon thousands of fan letters from its young readers, providing a glimpse into the popularity and wide reach of the publishing house (p. 507). The preface of *Young Hunters* reflects this fact, and colors Stratemeyer Syndicate novels not as mere stories or commodities, but as a mutually participatory relationship between author and reader. This display of enthusiasm on the part of Stratemeyer's readership demonstrates the ideological power

of mass market children's literature as a means for young readers to participate in the imperial imaginary.

The fantastic setting of *Young Hunters* is populated with stereotypical Puerto Ricans who reinforce the dominant racial and imperialist rhetoric of the period. Stratemeyer's descriptions of the novel's "wily Caribs" are similar to the language used by Rudyard Kipling (1899) in his influential poem, "The White Man's Burden" (Stratemeyer, 1900, p.110). Published in February 1899 in the *London Times* and *The New York Sun* in response to the potential American annexation of the Philippines, "The White Man's Burden" describes the persons within the newly-acquired U.S. territorial possessions as "Your new-caught sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child" who must be instructed by imperial actors in the ways of civilization. Following Kipling's racial justification of U.S. imperial action, a plate included opposite the book's title page confronts the reader with a similar conception of the Puerto Rican "type" even before the narrative of *Young Hunters* begins.¹ [Figure 1.] This illustration juxtaposes a standing, white American man, sartorially reminiscent of the figure of the Rough Rider and an embodiment of Rooseveltian masculinity, with a kneeling, dark-skinned Puerto Rican man dressed in rags. Reinforcing the national, racial, and cultural hierarchy present within the novel's narrative, the American man's posture conveys virility and vigor, while the Puerto Rican man at his feet assumes a pose of entreaty and desperation.² *Young Hunters'* illustration reflects Rouleau's (2008) assessment that the Stratemeyer Syndicate's publications instilled "a sense of personal and national superiority in the project of American aggrandizement" in a young readership, as these two visually disparate players act as surrogates for a presiding U.S. colonial government and the purported "need" for U.S. rule in Puerto Rico (p. 510).

Through such images, U.S. actors used the banners of benevolence and cultural patronage to justify the invasion and occupation of Puerto Rico. Creating a fictionalized crisis, mass media during the Spanish-American War circulated descriptions of Puerto Ricans as the victims of "unsanitary conditions" and "extreme poverty" under Spanish rule (Groff, 1902, p. 182). Such rhetoric validated the transfer of power from a Spanish empire to an American one and

¹ Although included in the original 1900 print of the book, these plates were omitted from the 1931 reprint of *Young Hunters in Porto Rico*.

² The positioning of the Puerto Rican man in the book's illustration is highly evocative of the image of the supplicant slave. A popular example of this visual rhetoric can be seen in John Greenleaf Whittier's 1837 abolitionist illustration, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"

originated with discourses surrounding Cuban independence.³ Convinced of the necessity for invasion through contrived humanitarian need, the American imagination envisioned the Spanish-American War as “a lofty and selfless undertaking,” and headed to war “in a spirit of exalted purposefulness, confident in their mission of liberation” (Pérez, 1998, p. 24).



Figure 1. Flyleaf illustration in *Young Hunters in Porto Rico: or, The Search for a Lost Treasure* (Chicago, Illinois: M.A. Donahue & Co., 1900). Project Gutenberg.

Yet the third figure hidden in the illustration’s shadowy background undercuts the immediate impression that Stratemeyer is echoing popular calls of occupation on the basis of humanitarianism. Behind both the heroic Yankee and the Puerto Rican man in the foreground, a nearly-illegible dark-skinned figure looms, depicted in a minstrel-esque caricature with grotesque, bulging eyes. The inclusion of this zombie-like figure lends an undertone of danger to the scene, as the American is not yet aware of this character’s presence. Considering that the majority of the Puerto Ricans represented within the narrative of *Young Hunters in Porto Rico* are characterized as savage, greedy, and duplicitous, any potential sympathy for the condition of the supplicant Puerto Rican man is eliminated by the addition of this ominous, racialized character. Instead, the scene now reads as a trap, with the intended effect of eliciting the reader’s concern for the plight of the heroic American youth caught between these two “uncivilized” figures. Such a manufactured scene of Otherized danger and deception reflects concerted efforts by news media to stoke public fears of a potential race war in Puerto Rico as justification for

³ Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock’s 1900 description of living conditions on the island acts as an example of the type of language used to convey a humanitarian justification for imperial expansion: “Men, women, and children, swollen, bloated, diseased, and emaciated, with pinched and haggard features, appeared weighted with the sorrows of years, the remembrance of which throws its shadow over me even now.”

increasing military presence on the island. A March 11, 1899 article in the *Atlanta Constitution*, for instance, similarly paints Puerto Ricans as “ready to revolt,” citing a sensationalized tale of a U.S. soldier murdered with a knife in the back as evidence for the inherent “treachery of the natives”—a fictionalized ambush reminiscent of the illustration in *Young Hunters*.

These discourses of native ingratitude first emerged with the American decision to reverse the promise of independence to Cuba almost immediately after the Spanish-American War. Expecting gratitude as a liberating force, indifference awaited U.S. troops upon their arrival in Cuba. Additionally, the American imagination did not anticipate the racial makeup of Cuban insurgents, “many of whom were men of color, weary and worn, wary of the North American presence” (Pérez, 1998, pp. 94-95). Theodore Roosevelt reminisced that Cuban troops were “almost all blacks and mulattos and were clothed in rags,” and Rough Riders bemoaned the “slovenly” and “ignorant” state of these “worst specimens of humanity” (Pérez, 1998, p. 95). Linguistic and cultural barriers in addition to preexisting racial prejudice solidified the image of the black insurgent in the American imagination as a sour, ignorant character. Building upon discourses established by American accounts of Afro-Cuban troops, the image of a dark specter lurking behind the back of a Rough Rider in *Young Hunters* extends these white anxieties surrounding the figure of the ungrateful black insurgent.

The antagonistic relationship between the Gun and Sled Gang and Bonehill's Puerto Rican characters throughout the novel reinforces the racial anxieties present in the book's initial flyleaf illustration. One especially notable instance occurs after the gang's Dick and Leander fall into a sinkhole while exploring the Puerto Rican jungle. Hearing these cries for help, two Puerto Rican men demand that they are paid ten dollars in exchange for fetching a rope after realizing that Dick and Leander are American. After reluctantly agreeing to the deal and escaping from the hole, one of the Puerto Rican men—identified as “Bumbum”—threatens Dick and Leander with violence when he feels that Dick has violated his honor:

"Now pay udder five dollars to Bumbum," grinned the leader of the pair. "Is your name Bumbum?" demanded Dick. "Yes, señor."

"All right, Bumbum, here is the money, and let me say that I think you about the meanest Porto Rican on the island." "Bumbum must earn his living, señor."

"I don't call this earning a living. What do you do, as a general rule? Lie about to squeeze strangers?" At this the Carib's face darkened. "No insult me, or you be sorry!" he cried, and made a movement as if to draw some weapon from his bosom.⁴ (Stratemeyer, 1900, p. 110)

⁴ If the Puerto Rican characters within *Young Hunters* speak English at all, it is usually in the childish, broken manner of Bumbum's dialogue. The only non-Puerto Rican character who speaks in this way is Danny McGuirk, the

The gang's encounter with Bumbum is one of the more extensive interactions with a Puerto Rican character in the novel, yet every other occasion in *Young Hunters* between Puerto Ricans and the gang is equally as hostile. Whether named or unnamed, Stratemeyer's racialized Puerto Rican caricatures are depicted as longing for the wealth which they assume the young American men possess. Characters like Bumbum provide a classic example of the colonial subject engaging in mimicry. The novel's American protagonists function as ideological ventriloquists, transforming Puerto Rican characters into puppets who echo and reaffirm pre-existing American assumptions of their ignorance and laziness.

In addition to employing racist assumptions about the Puerto Rican character to justify American intervention, *Young Hunters* offers an economic rationale for U.S. empire. Considering that the gang is on the island to search for hidden treasure, the novel presents two conflicting narratives: that the Puerto Ricans are impoverished, but that the island also possesses untold riches, with the underlying imperialist assumption being that Puerto Rican men, content to "lie about to squeeze strangers," are too uncivilized to avail themselves of their own resources, necessitating the stepping in of U.S. actors to find the island's "hidden treasure."⁵ The novel's hidden cache stands as a metaphor for the resources which, to the colonial mind, can be "properly" utilized to benefit U.S. capitalism.

Throughout the novel, this alleged, inherent inability of the imagined Puerto Rican character is justified throughout the novel by racist, colonialist means. Usually nameless, Stratemeyer's Puerto Rican caricatures are often distinguished only by racial types. Identified as Caribs, the Puerto Rican caricatures of *Young Hunters* possess a racial ambiguity which further separates them from the members of the Gun and Sled Gang. Whereas the gang are presented as unquestionably white, masculine, and nationalistic (as reinforced by lines of jingoistic dialogue such as "And what real, live American lad isn't patriotic?"), Stratemeyer's Puerto Ricans are racially nebulous and definite only in their position as the Other (Stratemeyer, 1900, p. 38). Such

gang's Irish cook, who is depicted as weak and simple-minded, and is additionally excluded from the heroic, thoroughly "American" ranks of the Gun and Sled Gang.

⁵ Women—Puerto Rican or otherwise—are virtually nonexistent in the world of *Young Hunters*. Considering the images of Cuban and Puerto Rican "damsels" who, in political cartoons leading up to the Spanish-American War, provided a gendered justification for the U.S. military invasion of the two islands, it is interesting that Stratemeyer doesn't additionally include this rationale in the Gun and Sled Gang's micro-reenactment of the Spanish-American War. Instead, the novel staunchly remains a masculinist tale with an intended audience of young, white American men.

a disdain for this racial hybridity is demonstrated with a line from the chapter detailing the gang's arrival in San Juan, which states: "Most of the colored men looked friendly enough, but here and there could be found fellows of mixed Carib blood—tall, ugly looking creatures" (Stratemeyer, 1900, p. 90).

The legacy of the term "Carib" is relevant to Stratemeyer's characterization of Puerto Ricans as inherently ignorant, duplicitous, and resistant to U.S. intervention. The earliest use of this term is found in Christopher Columbus' first letter to the monarchs of Spain in February 1493, in which Columbus describes Caribs as a group of hostile indigenous peoples defined as subhuman for their propensity (likely exaggerated in the European imaginary) for cannibalism. In his letter, Columbus establishes the Caribs, the inhabitants of Caris, "as villains who terrorized the innocent Arawaks and posed a significant impediment to European expansion" (Watson, 2015, p. 51):

People of a monstrous description I saw none nor heard of any, except those of the island named Caris, which is the second on the course from Espanola to India; this island is inhabited by people who are regarded by their neighbors as exceedingly ferocious; they feed upon human flesh. (Sanchez and Columbus, 1893, p. 11)

Columbus's letter became the foundation for European conceptions of indigenous peoples for hundreds of years to come, establishing the dichotomy between the ferocious and the noble savage. The Carib reputation for anthropophagy became so synonymous as to be extended into a descriptive term—*Canibales*, a variant of *Caribes*, is the origin of the word "cannibal" (Hulme, 1978, p. 115). In describing Puerto Ricans, Stratemeyer uses a term etymologically synonymous with savage anthropophagy.

In *Young Hunters in Porto Rico*, Caribs, figures of racial anxiety, are made distinct from black Puerto Ricans, a racial type already familiar—and firmly subjugated in society—to the American mainland mind. When Dick expresses unease at being surrounded by those who are racially and culturally Other, Robert Menden, the English treasure hunter, attempts to sooth Dick's worries while simultaneously revealing a rationale for U.S. imperialist intervention in Puerto Rico:

"These people have good cause to be ugly," put in Robert Menden. "Spain has robbed the natives for years by taxing them to death, and I understand that in many places the church has fallen into disrepute because the clergy do everything they can to get the money away from the sugar and plantation workers. It's really a sad state of affairs." (Stratemeyer, 1900, pp. 90 – 91)

Through Menden, a symbol of the English empire, Stratemeyer reveals that, while Puerto Ricans may “need” a civilizing force, simply *any* colonial actor will not do. Here, *Young Hunters* echoes the popular sentiment, expressed by U.S. mass media in addition to hawkish government officials, that the Spanish colonial regime was the root cause of poverty in Puerto Rico, and that the installation of a new U.S. imperial apparatus would be a necessary solution. In this passage, Menden is instructing his younger American counterparts on the Spanish Empire by echoing the Black Legend. First employed by Catholic Spain’s European Protestant rivals in the 16th century, British and Dutch colonial actors created the Black Legend in order to justify their own conquest of America. According to historian David J. Weber (1992), the Black Legend extended into the 19th century, as Anglo Americans sought to “vindicate” the imperial expansion of their English forebears while justifying the takeover of once-Spanish dominated territory (pp. 6 – 7). No matter how repugnant the colonial actions of Britain or America may have been, the Black Legend, through a “unique complex of” Hispanophobic “pejoratives,” always characterized the Spanish Empire as worse, justifying the actions of non-Spanish, non-Catholic imperial powers (Weber, 1992, p. 7).

Through use of this imperialist ventriloquism, adventure novels such as *Young Hunters in Porto Rico* encouraged a young American readership to engage with the imperial imaginary on a personal scale. Within the context of the Spanish-American War, these books enabled the reader to own a reproduction of the people and settings of new U.S. territorial locales, presenting lands such as Puerto Rico as picturesque playgrounds with promises of adventure and intrigue for a young, white, heterosexual male audience. This mass market literature inculcated patriotic values and instructed its readers in the ways of Rooseveltian manhood in order to groom a younger generation on their participatory role in U.S. empire.

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