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Wolf Children and the Discourse of Animality

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Cary Wolfe says, “It is crucial to pay critical attention to the discourse of animality quite irrespective of the issue of how nonhuman animals are treated... because the discourse of animality has historically served as a crucial strategy in the oppression of humans by other humans—a strategy whose legitimacy and force depend, however, on the *prior taking for granted* of the traditional ontological distinction, and consequent ethical divide, between human and nonhuman animals. ... Even though the discourse of animality and species difference may theoretically be applied to an other of whatever type, the consequences of that discourse, in institutional terms, fall overwhelmingly on nonhuman animals” (*Zoontologies*, 2003: xx).

Wolfe claims that discursive animality is always predicated upon the *prior* ontological and ethical divide between nonhuman and human animals, and his intervention is to suggest that as long as this division continues to deny ethical value to nonhuman animals, our critique of the effects of the discourse of animalisation on human individuals and groups remains caught in the very humanist principles it seeks to undermine.

I want to extend Wolfe’s argument to suggest that discursive animality, serving to desubjectivate certain humans by attributing to them animal characteristics, emerges precisely in relation to ideologies and practices of race, gender, and sexuality and situates human persons specifically as raced and gendered subjects. That is, a charge of animality is also always a raced and gendered charge specific to time-place coordinates. Postcolonial, queer, and feminist

analytics are, therefore, best situated to interrogate the status and treatment of animals.

I trace the interimplication of ideologies and practices of race, gender, sexuality, and animality in colonial representations of feral children. The feral child had long challenged the identity of the human in western philosophy, natural history, and literature before it entered “the mythology of science” with Linnaeus’s taxonomy in the eighteenth century. This creature appeared human in gross form but was nothing like human in behaviour or cognitive abilities. Rationality marked the human for Linnaeus, who, like Locke, was uncertain what to do with “creatures in the world that have shapes like ours, but are hairy and want language and reason,” which included philosophising parrots and anthropoid apes. Of course, this solution to the problem of the human only served to delimit subjectivity along lines of class, gender, race, and, notably, species. The anxiety produced by feral children and other border figures such as the European Wild Man, apes, and women was, however, not simply repressive in its effects; this was a productive anxiety, one that spurred projects in comparative anatomy, evolution theory, and, later, anthropology and psychoanalysis.

Following the lead of postcolonial scholars such as Satya Mohanty, I suggest that a cultural materialist reading of feral children in colonial contexts allows us to trace the simultaneous workings of ideologies of race, animality, gender, and sexuality and to distinguish between discourses of animality and animal-human relations. This—distinguishing between discursive animality and the treatment of animals—is, I think, critical to a project that attempts to not lose sight of animals; Lyotard articulates the need for this distinction when he says, “Dehumanization still implies human—a dead human, but conceivable: because dead in human terms, still capable of being sublated in thought.”

In November 1892, Rudyard Kipling wrote a letter to the editor of a children’s magazine informing her of Mowgli’s existence—“*He* was a wolf-boy (we have them in India)

but being caught early was civilized.” There is little doubt that Kipling was familiar with tales of real wolf children in India; Mowgli, however, is not only unlike real feral children but also, like other Kipling characters such as Kim, an exemplary imperial subject. *Kim* opens with the eponymous character astride a canon outside the Lahore Museum, and we soon learn, to use Ann McClintock’s words, that his “phallic potency is also a question of racial legitimacy” because under his burnt black exterior, Kim is really English, or at least half English. Through the novel, Kim has many adventures working as a spy for the colonial government and passing as native, Mohammadan or Hindu, as the occasion demands. Though he has grown up among natives, speaks like one, and can squat, lie, and drink water in the native way, his whiteness sets him unmistakably if invisibly apart, specifically as he “passes for ‘native’ in a way that no Indian in the book is able to pass for white”; that is, his very ambiguity fixes his identity. McClintock works with Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as a strategy of colonial knowledge and power, where natives take on a “flawed identity” that attempts to mirror the coloniser’s identity only to thus reveal their imperfection, their identity as *almost but not quite*, as *Anglicised* but never quite English, to ask whether the ambivalence that accompanies colonial mimicry is necessarily subversive. Arguing that ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity are not necessarily or inherently subversive and oppositional, McClintock says, “The transvestite Kim blurs the distinction between colonizer and colonized but only in order to suggest a reformed colonial control. The urchin mimic man... employs his ambiguity not to subvert colonial authority but to enhance it. He is the Indianized sahib: Indian but not quite. Kim’s passing is the privilege of whiteness.”

Mowgli blurs the distinction between animal and human only to suggest a reformed, romantic colonial humanism. Mowgli’s animality, like Kim’s nativeness, is an instance of passing “down” the hierarchy, a privilege of his humanity, which is established, importantly, by his treatment of animals in conjunction with his self-identification as human. It is important to

recall that the name *Homo sapiens* predicates humanity precisely on the single characteristic of self-knowledge, where the capacity to know oneself *as human* is a precondition (though not a guarantor) of humanity. This condition is unfulfilled in feral children but not in Mowgli.

Two years before Mowgli pranced about Indian forests as a young boy, cavorting with wolves, bears, and snakes in *The Jungle Book*, we meet him in Kipling's 1892 short story for adults "In the Rukh." This story presents a full-grown young man who rules over the forest with all the nonchalance of a beautiful "pagan" god. This is how Gisborne, a British forest officer in the Department of Woods and Forests with the Indian Government, first encounters him. We learn that the Department of Woods and Forests preserves the forests in the plains as reserves—"protecting" them from domestic animal and human populations, except in times of drought when the starving cattle and farmers are permitted to use the resources of the forests. Officers of the department "calculate the profit of their plantations to five points of decimals; they are the doctors and midwives of the huge teak forests of Upper Burma, the rubber of the Eastern Jungles, and the gall-nuts of the South." The forest officer must "know the people and the polity of the jungle; meeting tiger, bear, leopard, wild-dog, and all the deer." He is "the friend of newly-planted trees, the associate of uncouth rangers and hairy trackers." These few sentences establish the breadth of British control of Indian forests—the primary resource in their quest to better manage the subcontinent and extract resources from it most efficiently—and this includes control over various indigenous creatures, including tigers, wild-dogs, and hairy trackers. Gisborne needs to "know the people and the polity of the jungle," the habits and habitation of the animals as well as the people, if he is to exercise control over them. The forests are first and foremost to be protected from the native populations—animal and human—if they are to be profitable to the colonial government.

The Baconian aphorism, “Human knowledge and human power meet in one,” is distinctly at work in this story; like Gisborne, Mowgli, too, uses his intimate knowledge of local populations, in his case, the animal populations of the forest who collectively raised him from infancy, as a form of power and eventually in the service of the government. As Chinua Achebe points out, a colonial official’s claim that he knows his natives means two things; one, it suggests that the natives are simple and easily knowable and, two, that understanding and controlling go hand in hand—“understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding.” Ajay Skaria points out that as part of the ideology of the “rational” use of natural resources and “the articulation of a Cartesian scientificity” in colonial forestry, “plantations were set out in straight lines, an almost geometrical order was imposed on forests, and they were converted into industrial resources that had to be rationally utilized.” Gisborne had been in the forest for four years before he met Mowgli. By then, after he had “first loved the forest without comprehension” and then hated it fervently, “The forests took him back again, and he was content to serve them, to deepen and widen his fire-lines.... On some still day that grass would be burned off, and a hundred beasts that had their homes there would rush out before the pale flames at high noon. Later, the forest would creep forward... in orderly lines of saplings, and Gisborne, watching, would be well pleased.” This is the duty of the forest officer—to bring order to the unruly jungles and profit to the government. And it is equally Gisborne’s duty to bring order to Mowgli’s unruliness and put it to colonial service. In this work, there is room for both utilitarian treatment of and Romantic attitudes towards the forests and its denizens. Further, the killing of animals, which alone convinced many Englishmen to take up service in India, here ensures the wellbeing of both local animals and humans, and incidentally brings profit to the colonisers.

Into Gisborne’s solitary life bursts Mowgli with his knowledge of the forest and its wild

animals, his scorn for conventional village life and contempt for Abdul Gafur, Gisborne's "fat Mohammedan butler," and a desire to please Gisborne, whom he addresses as "Sahib" from the moment they first meet. Although Kipling was familiar with accounts of real feral children, Mowgli is modelled after the mythical heroic wild children of Europe; unlike feral children in India and elsewhere, Mowgli has language, walks on two legs, and knows not only that he is human and superior to animals but also that Gisborne is British and superior to him. However, Mowgli's acknowledgement of Gisborne's superiority lacks both envy and indifference, and this makes him the ideal imperial subject. Unlike Abdul Gafur, Mowgli, because of his unsullied animal nature, can be relied upon to serve the forests by serving Gisborne without hope for personal gain. This is made clear when Mowgli catches Abdul Gafur in the act of stealing Gisborne's payroll. Mowgli seems to have, and *be*, the best of both animal and human worlds—he has all the advantages of being a rational human being with none of the meaner proclivities of the native humans. His distance from the native human in conjunction with his romanticised animality serves to establish him in Gisborne's eyes as properly and desirably human. The hierarchy is transparent: Mowgli knows and controls the forests and its animal populations because he is an exceptional and a proper native (that is, because he is *unlike* real natives), and Gisborne knows and controls Mowgli naturally because he is an exceptional and proper British forest officer. In all this, animal populations serve as the object of control—Mowgli's animality not only does not disrupt the animal-human hierarchy, it serves precisely to reinforce it.

Mowgli has the virtues of animals (in this case, heightened senses, knowledge of forest rhythms, and his mastery over the wolves he grew up with) without having succumbed to animality to such a degree that he does not recognise Gisborne as his political superior or his own superiority over animals, especially those such as tigers that threatened the orderly management of forests and resource extraction. Moreover, like Gisborne's power over the

region as a whole, Mowgli's power over the forest comes from his intimate knowledge of the ways of its inhabitants, knowledge that both characters use unself-consciously in colonial service. Mowgli, unlike feral children, knows human ways but prefers his jungle ways—like Kim chooses when to be native and when sahib, and to what end, Mowgli, too, chooses the extent and effect of his animality and his humanity. This ability to know and control both his animality and his humanity establishes Mowgli as preeminently human.

It is significant that Gisborne meets Mowgli for the first time just as he is about to set off on the trail of the Red One, a tiger who has killed a forest ranger. Mowgli appears out of nowhere “naked except for the loin-cloth, but crowned with a wreath of the tasselled blossoms of the white convolvulus-creeper. . . . His voice was clear and bell-like, utterly different from the usual whine of the native, and his face as he lifted it in the sunshine might have been that of an angel strayed among the woods.” When asked about his origins, Mowgli tells Gisborne that he is “a man without caste, and for matter of that without a father.” The negative self-identification has led some scholars to suggest that Mowgli, the native whose abandonment as an infant saved him from turning into a whiny and treacherous native, is in search of a father, whom he finds in Gisborne; Gisborne's sensual apprehension of Mowgli, however, suggests that we could read the relationship between Mowgli and Gisborne in stereotypically colonial-homosexual terms, where Gisborne, the coloniser, is the older dominant partner, and Mowgli, the beautiful and feminised native youth, the initiate.

When Gisborne informs Mowgli that he is the “warden of this *rukh*,” Mowgli exclaims, “How?” Do they number the trees and blades of grass here?” Upon Gisborne's insistence that such classification and tabulation is necessary to protect the forests from “such gypsy fellows as thou,” Mowgli protests, “I! I would not hurt the jungle for any gift. That is my home.” Although there is a trace of sarcasm in Mowgli's questions about colonial forest management

practices, it is mingled with wonder that trees and blades of grass may be numbered, and he accepts Gisborne's justification of forest regulation by distancing himself from those "gypsy fellows," that is, regular natives, who *would* harm the forest, that is, harm colonial profits from the forests for the sake of subsistence.

From the moment when Mowgli leads Gisborne quickly and unerringly to where the man-eating tiger is resting after its meal and Gisborne puts a bullet in the tiger's head while Mowgli looks on approvingly because he is an enemy of all tigers—a typically human sentiment—Mowgli is Gisborne's self-appointed protector and deputy; he not only helps him manage the forest through his knowledge of the animals and their activities but also protects him from the treacherous Mohammedan Abdul Gafur. At the time of the first meeting, Mowgli also offers to carry Gisborne's gun. The image then is of the colonial shikari with a native servant, out on a hunt, and this hunt is unlike larger ostentatious colonial hunting expeditions in that it is less for pleasure and more a forest officer's duty. However, it is like the more famous hunting narratives in that it is also an instance for displaying colonial control. Unlike the servants usually employed by shikaris, however, whose loyalty could only be counted on so far and whose courage in the face of wild animals could be counted on not at all, Mowgli is the perfect companion. He is willing to perform the labour of servants without the threat of treachery because he has not learnt such human traits as greed and rebellion—his greatest interest is in the forest, just like Gisborne's is, and their understanding of what is good for the forest coincides. Moreover, unlike the natives, Mowgli is not afraid of wild animals because he knows enough of their ways to control them. Thus, in this story, colonial techniques regulating the use of forests, the treatment of animals and native humans, and the extraction of natural resources stem from principles of modern management that are also natural and universal.

It is important to remember that this story was written in the wake of both the Indian

rebellion of 1857 and factual reports of wolf boys in India. Kipling's story, far from being a harmless fable, serves to imagine the India that Kipling nostalgically called home, one in which hierarchies of race and species operated as natural laws, meeting no political resistance. One in which boundary confusions—between animals and humans and native and coloniser—lead not to a redrawing of humanist ontological and ethical distinctions but to a reformed logic of colonial domination. Mowgli's transgression of animal-human boundaries, far from threatening the coherence of the human, reifies colonial and humanist conceptions of proper humanity.