Feral disorders and colonial exclusions: Animal reared feral children, discourses of animality, and the treatment of animals in colonial India


I examine three representations of animal reared feral children from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in colonial India, tracing the administrative, classificatory, cultural, pedagogical, and scientific logics that seek to discipline the colonial feral child and harness it to projects of social knowledge production and colonial control. I contemplate the rhetorics and relations of animality, as distinct from wildness, through the zoomorphic figure of the animal reared colonial feral child in order to trace both the intertwined logics of species and race (species as race; species in and through race) and the place of material nonhuman animals in these logics of discrimination. I show that the feral child throws into disorder the taxonomically configured status of the human as an essential and self-evident category; it serves to delink ‘human’ from ‘subject’ and specifically enables a reconsideration of transpecies relationality. Feral children disrupt the management of animal-human distinctions not so much by annihilating the boundary between ‘animal’ and ‘human’ but by marking the point at which the two categories become indistinct. I use the anxiety prompted by the ‘animalness’ of feral children as a point of entry to consider the relationship among discourses of animality, the material treatment of nonhuman animals, and the sociology of knowledge formation. To this end, I examine William Sleeman’s 1852 report on Indian ‘wolf boys’ in A Journey through the Kingdom of Oude, Rudyard Kipling’s 1892-95 representation of Mowgli in The Jungle Books and in the short story ‘In the Rukh,’ and the 1920 case of Kamala and Amala, two wolf girls, as told through their ‘rescuer’ Reverend Singh’s diary account of their lives until Kamala’s death in 1929 and through scholarly and scientific discussions of the case in the U.S. academy well into the 1950s.

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