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Wild Wolves & Wild Women: Awakening a Poetics of Care through the Humanimal

Jessica M. Holmes[1]

Abstract

This paper explores the realm of poetry as one space in which to productively contest anthropocentric and patriarchal models of "care." Anchored in the story of the "feral wolf-girls," the paper examines the figure of the "humanimal"—primarily as depicted by Bhanu Kapil in Humanimal: A Project for Future Children*—through the lens of hybrid rhetoric and ecofeminist poetics. The story of the wolf-girls is at once cultural myth, literary re-telling and archival model; it engages familiar cultural archetypes such as the wild woman/girl, the surrogate mother/father, and the hybrid being or monster, and demonstrates how rhetorical categorizations can both reflect and contribute to hegemonic cultural practices. However, the hybrid figure of the "humanimal" also situates language as a site of negotiation and resistance to normative modes of dominance. By engaging ecofeminist discourses of the body, examining the peripheral borderlands of gender and species categorizations, and drawing parallels to present-day artifices of care, the paper demonstrates how culture upholds standards of conformity and perpetuates patterns of violence toward the vulnerable; and it argues that poetic models such as Kapil's text carve out a generative space for both intellectual and material resistance.*

Keywords: *Ecofeminism; poetry; poetics; ethic of care; wild woman; wolves; humanimal*

> Since the Female Self is the Otherworld to the patriarchs, their intent is to close us off from our own Selves, deceiving us into believing that these are the only doorways to our depths and that the fathers hold the keys.
>
> —Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*

> All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.
>
> —George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

In her ground-breaking text *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés explores the literary and cultural archetype of the "wild woman." Inhabiting the role of *cantadora*, or keeper of stories, Estés draws on myths and tales from a variety of time periods, locations and

[1] Jessica M. Holmes, Visiting Assistant Professor, English/Writing, Eastern Oregon University, USA. E-mail: jholmes4@eou.edu

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cultures, positioning the archetype as a versatile tool for women—especially those who live under the crushing, paradigmatic structure of patriarchy (which is to say all women)—to reclaim their connection to nature, their sense of self and a pathway toward a more liberated existence.

One association that recurs across many stories of "wild women" is that of women with (or as) wolves. Estés examines the possible grounds for this trope:

> Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mates, and their pack. They are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave.
>
> Yet both have been hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors. They have been the targets of those who would clean up the wilds as well as the wildish environs of the psyche, extincting the instinctual, and leaving no trace of it behind. The predation of wolves and women by those who misunderstand them is strikingly similar. (1992, p. 2)

Because the wild woman/wolf archetype reappears so consistently across myths, cultures and time periods, it provides a useful window through which to consider the function of story within a society—both its use as a tool for human connection and healing *and* its weaponisation for the purpose of serving hegemonic structures. In this article, I examine one representation of the wild woman/wolf trope: the semi-historical, semi-mythological tale of the Bengali wolf-children, as invoked by Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children*.[2] In this contemporary poetic text, the British-Indian writer threads together archival research and the poetic imagination (and aspects of her own personal and family history) to tell the story of Amala and Kamala, two orphan girls allegedly raised by wolves, then captured and reintegrated into "civilization" in an Indian orphanage in the 1920's.

In my reading of *Humanimal*, I argue that the poetic figures of the wolf-girls yield generative insight into interlocked histories of violence and model a radical disruption to the seemingly unshakeable paradigms of speciesism, patriarchy and colonialism. Kapil's engagement with the wild woman/wolf trope takes up questions of intergenerational trauma and the re-enactment of that trauma. My reading highlights the need to develop an ecofeminist ethic of care across difference (including differences of species, sex, race, class and physical ability). The wolf-girls embody multiple categories coded as "other"; they are wild, animal, female and penniless. They were also probably disabled or neurodivergent subjects, as I will discuss shortly.

Scholars such as Sarah Dowling and Akash Belsare have written (respectively) about the bodily difference of the wolf-girls' relegated animality (2013, p. 735) and the ways in which their ferality "refuse[s] linear narrativization and underscore[s] intimate relationality" (2020, p. 365).

[2] For the sake of concision, I will refer to the work as *Humanimal* (without its subtitle).

Both frame Kapil's poetic evocation of the wolf-girls as liberatory, particularly with regard to the notion of "coalitional poetics"—whether that be a coalition of humans and/or cross-species coalition. This article builds on similar themes but specifically engages ecofeminist discourses of the body—examining the peripheral borderlands of gender and species categorizations, and eventually drawing parallels to present-day artifices of care. My reading of *Humanimal* helps demonstrate how culture upholds standards of conformity and perpetuates patterns of violence toward the vulnerable, but the hybrid figure of the "humanimal" also situates language as a site of negotiation and resistance to those normative modes of dominance.

The word "humanimal" exemplifies a linguistic invention which can be employed to break down assumed species categories. The term can be used to describe a creature which is (supposedly) half-human and half-(nonhuman) animal. While I take the "wolf-girls" depicted in *Humanimal*, as my primary example, I also understand "humanimal" to describe other hybrid bodies, especially bodies deemed lesser or subhuman on account of their presumed otherness. Ironically the term can be said to describe all human bodies, since humans are an animal species; in this way, it highlights the falsity of the binary by exposing degrees of overlap and relation in a wide variety of human and nonhuman creatures. As a British-Indian writer, Kapil herself inhabits a hybrid identity and multipolar sense of belonging; her and her family's experiences as brown-skinned emigrants/immigrants figure prominently in her work.

Formally, Kapil's experimental style frequently straddles the genres of poetry and prose. *Humanimal* navigates not only identity categories, but also temporal and spatial scales—ranging from colonial-era India, to postcolonial England, to present-day, often jumping from one verb tense to another within the same scene. The text incorporates alpha-numerical sectioning, multiple fonts, images and quotes. She offers no linear plot or static speaker-figure, but instead weaves a web of interconnections between various stories, bodies, memories and societies, obstructing any fixed or unobstructed reading of the humanimal. This navigation across multiple scales of knowing and being is key to awakening a humanimal poetics of care. Only by examining patterns of violence across different contexts can we rupture the structures that uphold that violence. Kapil's prose poetry in *Humanimal* mirrors the hybrid body of the humanimal being; it lends shape, presence and agency to the wolf-girls, so as to vivify, and in doing so provides a powerful counter to the attempted regulation and erasure of their autonomous animal forms. In this way, we witness the mutually affecting relationship of language to material reality, of radical literary engagement to embodied modes of resistance.

A stated purpose of *Humanimal*, according to its speaker-poet, is to "make a body real." In this way, the text is engaged in the restoration of an absent referent[3]—animating (through poetry) the (hum)animal body, which has been rendered absent, violable, depraved, disposable and/or killable. What are the capacities and limitations of a poetic text to carry out this goal? In other words, what is the role of poetry in realizing an ecofeminist ethic of care? In attempting to address this question, I situate my argument at the intersection of ecofeminism and poetics; by exploring gendered examples of caretaking, namely poetic representations of human and animal mother/father figures throughout *Humanimal*, my analysis helps to define and activate what I call a "poetics of care." This poetics stands in stark contrast to the various

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[3] The term "absent referent" is borrowed from ecofeminist Carol J. Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990, p. 51-6). Adams builds on Margaret Homans' discussion of the absent referent in literature in *Bearing the Word: Language and the Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (1989).

forms of altering to which humanimal bodies are subjected. In the case of the wolf-girls, these forms of altering are carried out by obstructing, often forcefully, their natural and desired way of being (for instance, the way they look, eat, sleep and walk), by claming ownership through the predacious human gaze, and by the physical abuse of their bodies. This physical abuse is not just standard violence, but the purposeful breaking and moulding of humanimal form so as to "slic[e] them free" of animality—to *re*-form the wolf-girls to fit a conventionally desired human shape. Kapil fights back, at the level of language, repeatedly breaking then re-forming linguistic and imaginative conventions in order to oppose anthropocentric and patriarchal orthodoxy.

In Kapil's rendition of the story, the wolf-girls themselves carry out periodic acts of resistance in spite of their victimisation—asserting their wildness and their sisterhood—drawing strength from the very qualities upon which harm to the girls is justified. To what degree can and does the humanimal being resist capture/erasure, and what role might poetic practices play in interrupting the broader self-replicating cycle of abuse? Since all humans are humanimals, this application of poet(h)ics to the study of humanimal form unmasks consequences not only for cross-species and cross-sex relations, but for the way in which we read/write our own bodies—within, or sometimes despite—the dominant forces intent on fixing us in place.

The Origin of the Wolf-Girls' Story

From Romulus and Remus, to Kipling's Mowgli, to the Lobo Wolf Girl of Devil's River, legends and myths of children raised by wolves have recurred throughout a variety of Indo-European cultures and time periods. Associations between children and wolves have also been applied in nonfictional contexts; for instance, homeless orphans abandoned during the war and evacuation of East Prussia in the 1940's were labelled *wolfskinder*, or "wolf children" (Wagener, 2017). The term "feral children" has been used to describe child victims of abuse and abandonment, as well as to explain the purportedly animal-like characteristics and behaviour of children with disabilities or congenital defects. Amala and Kamala are often referred to as "feral children" or the "Bengali wolf-girls."

The poetry of *Humanimal* is in conversation with several source texts, as well as Kapil's own experiences traveling to Midnapure, the site of the girls' capture and care, including original photographs of the girls and the diary of Joseph Singh, published in *Wolf-Children and Feral Man* (with Robert Zingg) in 1942, over a decade after Kamala's death. The diary provides an almost day-by-day personal account of Singh's observations and experiences; however the authenticity of Singh's story has been widely disputed in more recent decades. In *L'Enigme des Enfants-Loup* (2007), French researcher Serge Aroles discusses ways in which the diary (and the girls themselves) functioned as a commercial asset for Singh, who was struggling to sustain his orphanage financially, and the possibility that the diary was written long after the fact—not in real-time or even during the girls' lives as Singh claimed (Amala died at age two after less than a year under Singh's care, and Kamala died nine years after her capture at approximately age seventeen).

Testimonies published in the 1950's describe Singh beating Kamala, possibly in order to make her perform "wolfish" acts in front of visitors. Aroles theorizes that both girls had neurological disabilities; he believes Kamala may have had difficulty walking and

communicating due to Rett Syndrome[4]. In poverty-stricken, colonial-era India, children with severe disabilities were often abandoned, and so Aroles hypothesizes that the girls may well have been orphans. As recounted in *Humanimal*, Kapil encounters the enduring pathologisation of poverty among children during her visit to Midnapure. In a church garden, village children offer to show her the graves and she takes their "sticky paw[s]" in her own. Quickly interrupted by the prelate, Kapil is told to stay away from the children because they are "very dirty" and could give her an "infection"—"Get away, children!" he cries; "*I'll skin you alive!*" Here, we witness not only the pathologisation of the poverty-stricken, but their association with animalistic qualities, as the prelate refers to the children's "paw[s]" and threatens to skin them as one might butcher an animal.

Kapil's research and writing project is motivated not only by an interest in the story of Amala and Kamala, but also by the story of her own father's upbringing. Raised by a widow-mother in extreme poverty during the late 1930's and 40's, Kapil's father was one of sixteen children, only seven of who survived into childhood. Among the myriad violences he suffered, in *Humanimal* Kapil maps the scars on her father's leg from a street beating. Again, we encounter the body as a site of contestation and testimony; a scar serves as a literal embodiment of experience (in this case violence), permanently written onto/into the body. Superimposing the photographic image upon a map of a London neighbourhood (Kapil's father eventually moved to England and became the first Asian headmaster in the United Kingdom), Kapil navigates multiple scales of violence—conjuring for her reader a striking manifestation of British colonial violence marking the individual—and I argue humanimal—body.

In the case of the wolf-girls' bodies, who grow sick from the human food they fail to digest, Kapil asks, "Is everything inside the body a kind of liquid, a way of taking information from site to site?" Indeed, throughout the book, the humanimal body acts as a site (or rather many sites) of movement, negotiation, entanglement, attachment, estrangement, memory, power and resistance. Remembering her father's seemingly premature death (in his fifties) in a British hospital, Kapil recalls the doctor telling her privately, "his body was clearly ravaged by the debilitating effects of poverty, early malnutrition and the multiple musculo-skeletal traumas that he appeared to have sustained as a child…it is a miracle he lived this long. He should really have died as a child." Herein we encounter the pathologised body (pathologised as a direct result of violence and oppression) and a simultaneous resilience by way of that very body.

The figure of the "humanimal" invokes not only discourses of the body (such as pathologisation), but draws attention to the peripheries of that body. It is peripheries that Kapil's text markedly inhabits—of bodies, perspectives, stories, genres, times, places, spaces and species. The book is fittingly written in a hybrid form, as Kapil blends contemporary free verse with undercurrents of mythical folklore, historical documentary and personal memoir to create a flowing yet fragmented longform prose poem. The poem moves intermittently "from site to site"—from fractured notes on her experiences at Midnapure, to memories of her father and past, to old photographs and scenes from Joseph Singh's journal, to the

[4] Rett Syndrome is a genetic neurological disorder, usually affecting females from a young age, that can impair one's speech and movement. Repetitive hand movements are a common symptom as well as difficulty walking. The condition was first described in 1966 by pediatrician Andrea Rett (long after the lives and deaths of Amala and Kamala).

imagined thoughts of Amala and Kamala—as if drifting in and out of a dreamscape that's slightly out of focus.

The False Hierarchies of Speciesism

The dim periphery between human and animal bodies is immediately invoked by the title *Humanimal*, which reminds and reconnects readers to our own positionality. Humans are after all mammalian creatures themselves. We share ninety-six percent of our genome with chimps (The Chimpanzee Sequencing and Analysis Consortium), though we would be no less animal if it were less; and, while we often use "animal" and the language of animality as a pejorative, evolutionary and cognitive science establish the biological fact that *homo sapiens*, a member of the *hominid* family, are undeniably an animal species. Though used by Kapil to describe specific bodies situated at the border of separate species categories, "humanimal" accurately describes every human body.

The well-documented opposition between the terms "human" and "animal" has been employed to segregate, enslave, exploit and murder human and nonhuman beings throughout history. Generally speaking, the more "animal" a human body—that is, the closer to the border between human and nonhuman species a body is regarded by those with power—the less rights that human is likely to be granted and the more oppression that human is likely to undergo. Examples abound—from indigenous peoples looked upon as "brutes" and "savages," to black slaves legally considered three-fifths of a person, to World War II prisoners of war subjected to vivisection. Animalistic language continues to be frequently used by those in power in order to debase and devalue individuals and groups of their choosing. In a 2019 essay, Carol J. Adams tracks "The Sexual Politics of Meat in the Trump Era," which includes examples of Trump and other powerful men using animalistic, misogynistic language to objectify women: "bitch," "piggy," "pussy," "dog," "cow," etc.

The collapsing of the supposed human-animal distinction frequently serves as either an underlying premise for violence toward some humans or a violence in and of itself. We can draw a parallel between the killability of animal lives and that of human life, such as collateral damage in war. National and international statistics on violent crime strongly support the link between violence toward animals and violence toward humans. According to the National District Attorneys Association's guidebook, violence toward animals is a predictor that an abuser may become violent toward people. Forty-three percent of school shooters have animal abuse in their background (Arluke & Madfis, 2013). Animal control and humane investigators are often the first responders to violent homes; animal abuse is more prevalent in homes that experience child abuse and domestic violence (Ascione & Shapiro, 2009); and the co-occurrence of multiple forms of violence increases future violence (Hackett & Uprichard, 2007).

Dominant cultural attitudes and practices that illustrate speciesist prejudices against nonhuman animals, including hierarchies of killability, do not only apply across human-animal lines, but also across animal-animal lines. Some animals are more killable than others. The most obvious example is that most American "pet owners" (a term that itself exhibits objectification and domination) deeply value and care for their dogs and cats yet think nothing of eating the killed body of a cow or pig. The distinction between wild animals and domesticated animals presents additional evidence of the dominant hierarchical positioning humans apply to different animal species. In the example of the wolf-girls, their "owner"

(Joseph Singh) attempts to domesticate the so-called "wild" animal—to "make human," or rather to extricate the human by obliterating that which is regarded as animal.

In our contemporary industrial context, domesticated animals (with some notable exceptions such as dogs and cats) are some of the most oppressed and least protected beings, while—at least among wilderness and conservation circles—wild animals are often deemed worthy of certain protections, status and/or respect. The Endangered Species Act, the protection of public lands and specified hunting seasons and regulations are notable examples[5]. In some sense, wild animals are considered of "pure" nature (or: capital-*n* Nature), whereas animals bred for human exploitation, whether as pets or through industrial farming, are not "natural" ecological subjects; rather they are supposedly of the human sphere, bred for the sole purpose of suiting our modern, consumptive "needs" and desires, and therefore deemed unworthy of the natural freedoms of, say, a polar bear or a bush elephant[6]. This particular brand of speciesist thinking is an argument based not on intelligence or sentience, but on eco-purity. And, of course, such thinking also tends to operate upon a false nature-culture divide, thoroughly debunked by post-structuralist scholars and ecocritics alike.

Wolf-Girls as Ecological Others

Speciesist hierarchies are a means of passing authoritative moral judgements about the non-value of any given body. The story of the wolf-girls provides an example of such moral judgements, but it also complicates and erodes binaries like human-nonhuman, wild-domestic and nature-culture. The wolf-girls' value (as passive objects) stems from their (supposed) novelty as uniquely hybrid creatures; but, illogically, their persecution (as threatening subjects) also stems from their hybrid status. In the case of Amala and Kamala, domestication of the supposed wild animal interestingly *both* increases and decreases that body's presumed value.

(Normative) human lives are inherently considered more valuable within the social hierarchy and so, in Singh's view, animal qualities must be excised out of the girls, as a malignant tumour might be excised from a body; but, ironically, as the girls become more "human," they also become less economically valuable to Singh. Visitors travel to the orphanage to see the girls perform their (hum)animality—walking on all-fours, consuming raw meat and howling at the moon. The exploitative gazes of these (allegedly paying) spectators, reminiscent of zoo-goers, reflect a simultaneous fascination with and disgust at these "other" beings. Amala and Kamala's behaviour—whether genuinely deemed "wolfish" or (more accurately, according to Aroles) attributed to symptoms of disability—is likewise regarded with disgust by their human caretakers. Kapil quotes from Singh's journal entries in *Humanimal*: a feral wolf-child is "freakish," "a hideous-looking being," "this other disastrous thing."

Singh's original descriptions of the mother-wolf interestingly bear no marks of such disgust; in *Wolf-Children and Feral Man* he writes, "[her] nature was so ferocious and affection so sublime. It struck me with wonder. I was simply amazed to think that an animal had such a noble feeling surpassing even that of mankind—the highest form of creation…" (p. 7). A sense of purity pervades Singh's characterisation of the mother-wolf—though it must be

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[5] Of course, even these examples are far from clear-cut. Debates persist over whether feral cats, for example, should be killed to protect birds. After successful lobbying from the agricultural sector, Idaho recently signed into law a controversial measure funding contractors to kill up to ninety percent of wolves in the state in order to "protect" livestock (NYT).

[6] Again, there exist notable exceptions (trophy hunting, for instance).

acknowledged that this purity doesn't prevent Singh's violence toward the wolf; just moments after Singh is "struck [with] wonder" at the mother-wolf, his men pierce her through with arrows, killing her. Nevertheless, this perceived purity sets up a strange duality with regard to the humanimal spectrum: to appear and behave entirely animal is "noble" and natural, and to behave entirely human (a standard to which even Singh himself fails to live up to, as I will discuss shortly) is "normal," civilised and natural. But to inhabit a liminal borderland between the categories of (neurotypical) human and (nonhuman) animal is to elicit cultural disgust and ultimately to warrant rehabilitation or fixing.

Sarah Jaquette Ray discusses the phenomenological pattern of human disgust toward certain bodies in *The Ecological Other* (2013). Exploring the intersections of disability, the body and the environment, Ray argues that

> the environmental movement deploys cultural disgust against various communities it sees as threats to nature. […] Disgust shapes mainstream environmental discourses and vice versa, and it does so by describing which kinds of bodies and bodily relations to the environment are ecologically "good," as well as which kinds of bodies are ecologically "other." […This] discourse of disgust enforces social hierarchies even as it seeks to dismantle other forms of hegemony. (p. 1)

Because of their hybrid status, the wolf-girls become what Ray calls "ecological others"—impure, dirty, unnatural subjects (distinguished from "good ecological subjects" such as the mother-wolf). In addition to being impure, their atypical bodies and behaviour are perceived as downright threatening (to Singh and company) in their non-conformity. Critical disability theory scholar Hannah Monroe discusses medicalised constructions of normative behaviour and non-conformity in "Post-Structural Analyses of Conformity and Oppression" (2019). She states,

> Discursive constructions of normalcy are often maintained through the medicalization of non-conformity. We can observe the dominance of the medical discourse in the twentieth century through the vast amount of social phenomena that have been medicalized as opposed to de-medicalized. (p. 62)

Building on the work of disability studies scholars and activists such as Mike Oliver, Dan Goodley and Anne McGuire, Monroe highlights how differences have been "pathologized to be objects of social control"; dominant discourses interpret disability as "a dangerous deficiency that needs to be protected against." Much like the dirty "paws" of the Midnapure children from which Kapil is told to back away, the perceived threat Amala and Kamala pose to Singh and company is perhaps commensurate only to their actual vulnerability. Singh seemingly inhabits the role of both protector and oppressor—protecting the girls on account of their biologically human status (in his journal, he claims the other men wanted to shoot them, but he alone, recognising the girls to be human, dissuaded them), while oppressing them on account of their animalistic behaviour. Their supposed impurities are indeed pathologised and then medicalised (right in line with Monroe's assessment of dominant twentieth century medical discourse); because the girls come to be defined by their humanimality, their (dis)abilities become "objects of social control." In this way, Singh attempts to neutralise any threat they pose to social-cultural paradigms and the value judgements those paradigms impose.

The Body's Violent Eviction

Now turning more closely to Kapil's text, my analysis activates a poetics of care—illuminating, through this example, how poetry might actively resist the promotion of (false) environmental, animal and human standards of bodily purity and conformity, as well as hegemonic discourses of the body that serve to devalue and debase (and ultimately erase or make killable) living subjects. Late in *Humanimal*, Kapil[7] makes explicit the purpose of her text:

> [to] make a body real. This is a text to do that. Vivify.

Indeed, the bodies of Amala and Kamala have been rendered lifeless, absent or unreal in a number of ways. Amala is made absent literally, dying of the treatment she receives at the orphanage. The girls are also made absent metaphorically through Singh's authorship over their lives—both for the "audience" of voyeuristic visitors and also in his diary entries years later. Thirdly, they are made absent through descriptive (and prescriptive) terminology; Kapil repeatedly invokes Singh's language and imagery when he describes the girls prior to their capture as "two white ghosts." Perhaps no image captures the notion of absence and lifelessness better than that of a ghost, as it renders the humanimal being materially bodiless, almost invisible and already dead.

The de-vivifying or ghosting of the humanimal being is repeatedly described by Kapil as an eviction, a term which implies the forced expulsion of a subject from her home. Recalling the death of another child—one of her father's many siblings ("One of the boys pushed the girl off the roof")—Kapil writes,

> In the quick, black take of a body's flight, a body's eviction or sudden loss of place, the memory of descent functions as a subliminal flash.

We might apply such flight (metaphorically) to the wolf-girls as well; translated into ghosts, they undergo "a body's eviction" as well as a "sudden loss of place" (literally taken from their "place" in the jungle). "Evict[ed]" from both their bodies and their home, Amala and Kamala are placed in the orphanage—which Kapil repeatedly refers to (again drawing on Singh's language in his diary entries) as the "Home." By always calling it "the" capital-*h* Home, she calls to mind the literal shelter of a residence or property (as opposed to a place of belonging) and moreover an institutional facility (this usage typically being applied to a facility housing the vulnerable or debilitated, such as an elderly "Home" or an asylum)[8]. In this way, Kapil illuminates the girls' "eviction" from an embodied home (body and jungle) in favour of an institutional (and monetizable) one (the orphanage).

In order to "vivify" that which has been made absent, Kapil expresses a need for (re)embodiment:

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[7] I refer to the prose poem's primary speaker by the author's name because of the self-expressed memoir style, but of course the reader should keep in mind the inherent distinction between the construction of author-as-character/speaker and the author herself. As Joan Retallack states, in *The Poethical Wager,* "any I in poetry is by definition persona" (2003, p. 6).

[8] We might also note that the word *ecology* (or more specifically the prefix *eco*) stems from the Greek *oikos*, which is roughly translated as "home," but also "family," "house," or "property" (which in ancient Greece would typically include slaves) (*OED*).

> To write this, the memoir of your body, I slip my arms into the sleeves of your shirt.
> I slip my arms into yours, to become four-limbed.

Though "four-limbed" associatively conjures the image of the wolf-girls walking on all-fours, Kapil reminds us here that both humans and wolves are "four-limbed," making this a moment of true humanimal embodiment. In fact, the "you" to whom she refers above invokes not just the wolf-girls but also Kapil's father, as well as the "future child" she periodically addresses (all three are called forth in the immediately preceding lines and images). This blurring of separate identities, storylines and temporalities (past/present/future) occurs frequently throughout *Humanimal* and is another example of the capacity of poetry to engage non-linear thinking.

Recognising the body/poem as a site of imaginative association and memory, Kapil creates a poetic mosaic of humanimal presence. However, she is also wary of memory—"A scar is a memory. Memory is wrong. The wrong face appears in the wrong memory."—and the tendency of memory, especially when coloured by trauma, to amalgamate different individuals and experiences. The speaker-poet critically probes the ensuing struggle between seeking a requisite embodiment (of wolf-girls as well as all otherised beings) and accepting a very real, sometimes impassable estrangement between separate individuals, contexts and memories. In the room where Kamala mourned her sister's death, Kapil

> sat on the edge of the bed and tried to focus upon the memory available to me in the room, but there was no experience.

A "body's eviction" has indeed occurred, and in this moment Kamala proves unreachable; embodiment is not possible, meaning Kapil cannot write "the memoir of [her] body," cannot "slip my arms into yours, to become four-limbed." In this moment, the poetic imagination fails to make whole, to re-vivify across time-space; it holds space only for loss, absence and disconnection. Kapil's speaker-poet mourns not only the loss of the wolf-girl, but the limitations of a poetic practice.

Humanimal Mother, Humanimal Father

Though a poetic practice cannot fully undo the eviction of Amala and Kamala from body/home/memory, I argue Kapil succeeds in exposing the ubiquity of the humanimal state of being. She achieves this through connecting to her own four-limbedness (her own humanimality) and the humanimality of those memories and accounts she *can* access. Though Amala and Kamala seem uniquely situated upon a periphery or threshold between realms, humanimal characteristics mark each and every body in the book.

Singh[9] is no exception. When tracking the wolf-girls, "[i]n his hide, Joseph shivered"; his doctor eats "quickly and sloppily, like a dog"; and on one occasion at the orphanage, Singh bites Kamala as punishment. These animalised descriptions carry out an ironic reversal, in which Singh and company, self-professed enforcers of civilised culture and humanness, and opposers of all that is animal, appear remarkably animal themselves. Literally stalking the girls as a predator stalks his prey, Singh acts downright "wolfish." And later, forcing them into his

[9] In Hindi *singh* translates as "lion."

desired human form, I argue he becomes less human himself—or rather, he displays a gross lack of humanity in his treatment of Amala and Kamala.

The goodness (or to use anthropocentric language, the *humanity*) of the mother-wolf (at least as the journal entries describe) and the predation of Joseph Singh provide two very different models of caretaking, guardianship and parenting. Singh marvels at how the wolf "bestow[ed] all the love and affection of a fond and ideal mother on these peculiar beings, which surely once had been brought in by her […] as food for the cubs" (p. 7). In this instance, the mother-wolf exhibits a key characteristic of a matriarchal social order[10]: non-hierarchical kinship. She seemingly recognises sovereign beings across species lines and implements an unequivocal ethic of care (i.e. nurturing the girls alongside her own cubs). In Kapil's iteration of the story, upon separation and for months afterward, the wolf-child longs for her animal mother:

> I want my mother. With one crack in the stuff of her she was gone.

Mourning her adoptive mother-wolf's murder (remembering the sensorial "crack" of the gunshot) and that mother's enduring absence, the wolf-child has clearly become re-orphaned by way of forceful eviction from jungle home/mother and insertion into human civilisation; we are reminded, as Deane Curtin acknowledges in "Compassion and Being Human" (2014), that an ethic of care in not based on relation to uniquely human traits.

In addition to the figure of the wild wolf as mother, Kapil offers up another narrative of maternal care by way of the river as mother-figure. Encountering a local Bengali man moulding clay figurines by candlelight, Kapil asks after the meaning of this activity, to which he replies, "'Dushu.' 'What is it for?' 'The river'"; Kapil's interpreter translates,

> Sarasvati. She is our mother and we give her back to her mother. The river is our mother. I take her to the river.

The figurine is an embodiment of Sarasvati (or Saraswati), the Hindu goddess of art and learning; it also refers to the ancient Sarasvati river, now dried up but considered by some Hindus to abide in metaphysical form. In this sense, Kapil encounters yet another mother who has been made (physically) absent. Despite this eviction, through the creation of the figurines, the man carries out a symbolic restoration of the absent referent; and through the giving of the figurines, he carries out an ethic of care—this time enacted from child to mother—manifesting a relationship of compassion and reciprocity. Goettner-Abendroth identifies two other characteristics of matriarchal societies as "economic mutuality, based on the circulation of gifts" and "cultures of the Feminine Divine" (2012, p. xxv). The perception of the river as sacred and maternal provides another heavy contrast to Singh's sacrilegious treatment of the mother-wolf (despite recognising her supposed nobility and care) as well as to the model of Singh himself as parent-figure or caretaker.

In fact, Singh exemplifies a crooked fatherhood not only in his role as adoptive parent-figure to Amala and Kamala, but also in a religious sense—he is "Father" or Reverend Singh, or as Kapil describes him, "A tall, extremely handsome Father, sidetracked from his Mission." Kapil revisits this deviation from religious or spiritual righteousness, painting Singh's venture into the jungle to capture the wolf-girls as a sinful violation of wilderness: "he transgressed a

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[10] Heide Goettner-Abendroth outlines, based on her extensive research, the definitional qualities of matriarchal societies in *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe* (2012).

wild space." The religiously tinged diction used in this line casts the jungle as a sacred place not to be entered (at least not in Singh's manner). A murky humanimal divide marks the separation between the realms of the human and the wilderness; and while the edges of this borderland space are never explicitly defined, Singh clearly oversteps. Here we witness how the predatory intrusion of the Father contrasts the nurturing care of the various mother figures throughout *Humanimal*. Speciesist practices and violations of bodily sovereignty/sanctity are inherently tied up with patriarchy.

Liminal Light and Colonial Altering

Descriptions of borderland, transitional and liminal spaces recur throughout *Humanimal*, usually inhabited by the wolf-girls. These spaces are sometimes literal—as when Kamala "keen[s] and shuffle[s] for many days at the perimeter of the Home" mourning the death of her sister—, sometimes imaginary—Kapil herself purports to end up "somewhere on the edges of the story"—and frequently comprised only of transitions of light—such as the depiction of the forest in which "Perimeter space transfuses moonlight." Kapil (and Singh in his journal) emphasise Amala and Kamala's aversion to the sun and preference for dark or night-time. Singh attributes this to their animal identities, wolves being nocturnal animals; he claims the girls can see in the dark. This becomes further evidence of their supposed backwardness or deficiency (even though seeing in the dark is clearly an *ability*, not a disability). Kapil's treatment of light and dark over the course of the book, upon close inspection, not only disrupts speciesist thinking but also illuminates broader patterns of interconnected eco-violence (ecocide).

Kapil repeatedly associates the girls with the moon throughout *Humanimal*. Mythologically and astrologically, the moon is often associated with divine femininity, the female body and motherhood (in contrast to the sun as a masculine energy or figure). Kapil, remembering a particular moon from her childhood and relocating it to the jungle in India, also characterises the moon as dangerous and fear-inducing; "Have you ever seen pink moonlight? It is frightening. It is a cousin to shadow, just as a wolf is to a dog." Through this image of moonlight, Kapil identifies the notions of both femininity and animality as threatening to normative conceptions of the human (particularly "wild" animality; for instance, the aforementioned wild wolf is a threat whereas the domesticated dog is not). The climax of Singh's violent "transgression" occurs fittingly under moonlight:

> The humanimal conquest is a moonlit capture. The moonlight illuminates the termite mound where the wolves have hollowed out an underground cave with their beaks. Sub-red, animal wolves and human wolves curl up with their mother, in sequence, to nurse. When the babies fall asleep, the mother slips out into the jungle. As she crosses the blue clearing, Joseph cocks his gun and aims, the culmination of weeks of hunting. There is a dazzling break in the darkness.

This moment of heightened humanimal encounter is marked by multiple crossings-over; the wolf-cubs and wolf-girls have crossed from above into the underground cave, the mother-wolf crosses the blue clearing, and finally Singh's bright gunfire crosses into the darkness—shattering the safety that darkness provides and starkly, violently contrasting the soft, maternal light of the moon.

Singh's transgressive crossing-over mirrors histories of industrial and colonial violence enacted upon the Indian landscape. Kapil elucidates at the end of the book,

> the humanimal moment occurs most powerfully at dawn, when the eyesight adjusts to the light of the upper rooms of the jungle.

Dawn is of course a transitional juncture, from night to day, from dark to light. But within this seemingly beautiful, natural image of light breaking through the upper canopy of trees, there lies a great deal of violence. As Kapil points out earlier in the book, the British colonisation of India brought on a destructive alteration of the native Indian forest, home to sal trees which, when exploited, brought a great deal of profit to the colonial government. Kapil explains how

> the British erased sections of the forest, then re-planted it like a Norfolk copse, brutally. Linearity is brutal. Yet, now, the jungle is more luminous and spacious than it would have been naturally.

When placed in this historical context, the light in "the upper rooms of the jungle" constitutes a symbol of incursion and predation, marking colonisation's "brutal" effect on the Indian landscape (and people). Staring at the "perimeter" from her verandah, Kapil affirms,

> Here, I have a private view of a corrupt, humanimal landscape, a severed fold.

Importantly, the "humanimal moment" is not just an embodiment of the brutal entanglement between animal and human, between native habitation and violent colonisation, but is "most powerful" at dawn "when the eyesight adjusts to the light…" It is this adjustment of sight that is particularly horrifying; an acclimation to a home or space forever altered, violence becoming normal to the human eye—perhaps even beautiful, as an image of early morning light cascading through the tops of the trees.

Exposing anthropocentric and Eurocentric readings of the jungle, Kapil reminds us, "A forest is a bed for animals." In contrast to colonial conceptions of a forest as resource and revenue supply (what might today be termed "natural capital" or "ecosystem services"), as well as to Singh's notion of a building/institution such as the orphanage as "Home," the image of the forest as bed invokes a sense of refuge and care—similar to the notion of river as mother. Such natural spaces, in the eyes of the wolf-girls and the Bengali clay artist, constitute sacred caregivers, integral to a compassionate, ecofeminist conception of home and to a life-sustaining relationship with nature. The colonial altering of the jungle disturbs this relationship, as we can see from the pain it causes animals:

> A forest is a bed for animals. When the rains come each June, these animals make nets in the upper branches, suffering nightly, twitching, from an incomplete, lunar darkness. It's the time before electricity, those are not birds. They are wolves…

In the story of Amala and Kamala, Joseph Singh plays the coloniser; through his "hunting," "conquest" and "capture" and in the action of "cock[ing] his gun," Singh's masculinity and dominance over the jungle environment and the living beings inhabiting that environment are on display. This masculinity and dominance carry over into the human world; in the orphanage, like the animals in the upper rooms of the jungle, the girls also "[suffer] nightly, twitching, from an incomplete, lunar darkness." Time and time again, we witness the

interconnections between violence done unto land/ecosystems, violence done unto nonhuman animals and violence down unto humans (especially female humans).

Breaking, Blaming and Claiming the Humanimal

In studying patterns and paradigms of violence, it is important to examine how (alleged) justifications are constructed. In the example of the wolf-girls, Singh exerts violence under the pretense of humanising them. At the orphanage they are beaten and mutilated: "Joseph took Kamala's hair in his fist and cut it off, close to the skull"; "They strapped her down" and shaved her arms and legs; "Accused by an orphan of biting, Kamala is called into Joseph's study where he bites her back. Beats her with a bamboo wand, then pricks her in the palm with its tip"; "The doctor breaks Kamala's thumbs then wraps them in gauze"; "They dragged her from a dark room and put her in a sheet. They broke her legs then re-set them." These violences (among many others) are done to the wolf-girls' bodies in the name of therapy, rehabilitation and care—to "slic[e] them *free* of the wild animal" (emphasis added)—yet this so-called care lacks any trace of consent, empathy for suffering or regard for bodily sovereignty. Just as the colonisers violently alter the native jungle, Singh violates and colonises the bodies of the two wolf-girls, carrying out a brutal "eviction" that leaves them anything but "free."

In Kapil's iteration of the story, Kamala indeed begins to feel as though portions of her animal body have been dismembered or amputated. Upon being punished for a tiny, innocuous inattention, forgetting a prayer book, she recalls,

> I had a tail. I have a hymn. My frayed blue hymnal I left in the box by my cot and the Father smacked my side with a wand.

Here, the use of past tense—"I *had* a tail"—implies a present-day absence of this animal embodiment. Kamala's mention of Singh as "the Father" suggests that she does not identify Singh as *her* father, but rather a dominant, masculine authority figure ("*the* Father") who brandishes power in the form of abuse. This particular scene bears a striking resemblance to one later in the book, in which another father-figure carries out violence toward children under his care. Kapil remembers her own father, a school headmaster in England, beating a young black boy:

> As a child, I was waiting just outside my father's office, kicking my legs on a chair as I read *Bunty*, my weekly comic. I was waiting with a tall black boy of about twelve, already six feet tall. "What did you do?" "Nuffink." Without warning, both incredibly fast and in slow motion, my father came out of his headmaster's office with a cane. Within moments, the boy was writhing on the carpet, doubled up—"Please sir!"

The boy's race is starkly apparent in Kapil's description[11], but the recollection also places emphasis on his self-declared innocence—"'What did you do?' 'Nuffink.'"[12] Just as Kamala's only crime in the aforementioned scene is to forget her prayer book by her cot, here the gross disproportion between the brutality carried out by the abuser and the supposed wrongdoing

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[11] Ample literature exists on the animalization of the black body, especially as a pretence for acts of violence and dominance. This topic largely falls beyond the scope of my article.

[12] This line alludes to Dicken's *Bleak House* (in which a street sweeper boy states repeatedly "I don't know nothink").

of the victim exhibits a pattern of hegemony across multiple contexts and time periods. To be vulnerable in the world (i.e. to be a child, to be black, to be female, to be wolfish…) is to be already culpable and therefore killable; to be made ghost—inhuman, near-invisible and already dead—in the eyes of the powerful.

The violent objectification and erasure of the humanimal body is also carried out by the gaze of those eyes. When Joseph Singh comes upon the cave of wolves in the jungle, before carrying out any physical assault, he lays claim to the girls by means of looking;

> The cave was littered at its entrance with bones. The porters gave him their coarse, white woollen shawls and he threw them over their forms. Two girls. "*I saw them first*." (emphasis added)

In the eyes of their captor, the girls don't even have bodies yet—only "forms"—as the male gaze wields its claim of ownership. This act of visual objectification is later replicated by visitors who flock to the orphanage to regard the humanimal as spectacle:

> […] villagers from the settlement of Midnapure came regularly to the orphanage, lining up at the gate to catch a glimpse of the two jungle children. For a few minutes a day, Joseph's wife, the Home's Mother, let them in and they swarmed to the room where the youngest girl was failing. They watched her fade and jerk in her cot, the spittle coming down over her chin.

By watching Amala's "failing," the visitors—many of who would pay to view the wolf-girls, according to Singh's 1923 report—participate in a public act of exploitative voyeurism, one in which, as in a zoo, (hum)animals are cast as objects for consumption by the human gaze. Kapil, while viewing a photograph of Amala, imagines a rejection and repudiation of the voyeuristic gaze;

> I looked into Amala's eyes in the photograph but she looked away and began to cry. She destroyed the paper. She killed her face.

Herein the imagined wolf-girl, upon being scrutinised, carries out the obliteration of selfhood herself—"She killed her face"—seemingly as the only available means of protection (or escape) from such a gaze.

Singh, the villagers and Kapil herself all demonstrate an intense fascination with the wolf-girls, even as they carry out varying levels and forms of voyeurism and/or violence. The number of stories, legends and accounts of feral children throughout recorded human history leads us to ponder why humans are so enraptured by the notion of a humanimal body. Kapil offers one possible clue when she writes,

> I saw their tiny black eyes squinting through the fence. I saw the tiny mirrors sparkling on their hems. Were they wolves?

The description of the eyes as "tiny mirrors" suggests the manifestation of a self-reflection. When these onlookers regard the wolf-children, do they see something of themselves? Does the humanimal reflect something within all of us, the book seems to ask—some inner wildness or hybridity, or rather a deep-seated ontological uncertainty as to who or what any body really is: "Were they wolves?"

Modern Applications of Domestication

When an abuser carries out violence for an extended amount of time, the victim often submits (to varying degrees) to that dominance. Kamala, for instance, eventually begins to eat human food, to stand and walk on two legs a little, and to socialise with other human children at the orphanage (she ultimately spends approximately nine years under Singh's care before dying of tuberculosis around age seventeen). Kapil also quotes Singh's diary, in which (after almost four years at the orphanage), Kamala apparently associates some amount of safety with her caretaker/captor:

> Nov. 18 Locked out of inner compound; extremely frightened, takes refuge in haystack. Tries to open door by force, fails. I called to her…instead of shunning my company, (she) now sought it.

Whether we should attribute this change to Stockholm syndrome or to the fact that, with her mother-wolf and wolf-sister long dead, Singh has become by this point the only caretaker or "family" Kamala has (save perhaps Singh's wife and the other children in the orphanage), or whether we should believe it at all, it is clear that Kamala undergoes a partial transformation during the nine years she spends in human co-habitation.

In *Beauty and Misogyny* (2015), Sheila Jeffreys invokes feminist psychologist Dee Graham's concept of "societal Stockholm syndrome" (1994) in her critique of harmful cultural practices in the West. Graham extends the traditional definition of Stockholm syndrome, in which hostages bond to their kidnappers, to the common female reaction to living under a patriarchal system wherein male violence poses a direct threat. Societal Stockholm syndrome can take place consciously or subconsciously. We can witness more subtle examples of this social survival impulse in women's participation in (and frequent celebration of) modern beauty standards, such as plastic surgery, eating disorders and the removal of body hair. Of course, the domestication and sanitisation of female bodies is furthered through corporate-driven social standards for hygiene practices, body shape and grooming rituals. Girls' and women's bodies, behaviours and even minds continue to be violated, altered and re-formed, as the wolf-girls were, into shapes preferable to our captors. Many normalised practices of contemporary Western female subordination directly parallel the (albeit more forcible) experiences of the wolf-girls in *Humanimal,* such as the breaking and reshaping of their natural anatomy, the tight regulation of their diet, and the shaving of their "animal" bodies upon capture and attempted integration into society. It appears that even the bodies of modern Western women are too wild, wolfish or threatening to be left unaltered.

Many current misogynistic cultural conventions find their roots or parallels in more brutal exhibitions of female subordination and violence against woman and girls. From the physical restriction of the Victorian corset (which attempted to reshape the natural female form) to the medieval scold's bridle (a literal muzzle, as if for a wild dog/wolf, sometimes attached to a leash—note the animalistic dehumanisation) used to torture and publicly humiliate women deemed scolds, witches or gossips, to the witch trials themselves (in which thousands of women were deemed so troublesome to the culture and institutional structures that they were burned, drowned or hung), female expression and existence have routinely been deemed threatening to the normative patriarchal social order.

Subordination is often carried out under the banner of liberal empowerment, education or medical care. In *Humanimal*, physical violence is described through just such a lens:

> Her two arms extend stiffly from her body to train them, to extend. Unbound, her elbows and wrists would flex then supinate like two peeled claws. Wrapped, she is a swerve, a crooked yet regulated mark. This is corrective therapy; the fascia hardening over a lifetime then split in order to re-set it, educate the nerves.

Here, the bodily form of the wolf-girl is broken ("split") and "correct[ed]" to fit Singh's definition of a human. In the eyes of her oppressor, the girl is a "crooked" deviation or "swerve" to be straightened; the inherent wickedness of her very existence demands "corrective therapy." Her physical form—or "mark"—must be "train[ed]" and "regulated"; the disobedient nerves must be "educate[d]." Kapil's invocation of "educa[tion]" situates this particular instance of cruelty within extensive histories of violence that are/were framed as (re-)education. Examples include boarding schools for indigenous children in North America (which sought to eradicate their language and culture) and labour education camps in Holocaust-era Germany. With regard to medicalised versions of domestication, we might look to nineteenth and twentieth century "treatments" for so-called "female hysteria,"[13] which included forced bed rest, hypnosis, electric convulsive therapy, as well as medical and marital rape. Even the widespread introduction of the birth control pill can be viewed as a domestication and medicalisation of natural fertility cycles and reproductive health (even as we acknowledge its role in helping women to enter the workforce in the twentieth century). Another example—one which has only grown in cultural prevalence and intensity—is the pathologisation and medicalisation of natural childbirth in the contemporary era. It is when a woman refuses standardised industrial care (such as foregoing an ultrasound or opting to birth at home) that she is deemed most threatening (allegedly to herself and her baby—but in reality to the system itself).

Ultimately the pathologisation and domestication of the "wild" wolf-girls of *Humanimal* parallel past and present-day artifices of care and the cultural disparagement of radical alternatives. The regulation of language is intimately bound up with the regulation of bodies. Once again, we can draw parallels to today's society; drawing on Karen Callaghan's *Ideals of Feminine Beauty* (1994), Jeffreys describes how "social control in the contemporary West is not usually imposed on individuals by brute force, but achieved through, 'symbolic manipulation,' which can include such things as advertising and women's magazines and 'creates the guise of free will and choice.'" (p. 24). Language, poetry in particular, is largely a symbolic mode of creation and communication. In this way, it is well-positioned to challenge such "symbolic manipulation" and therefore normative conceptions of human and male dominance.

As I have argued, Kapil's text models a poetics of care, carving out a generative space for both intellectual and material resistance. The poem itself provides something of a counterpoint to the gross abuse of female, otherized and humanimal bodies. A poem is both bound and unbound, a regulated and unregulated form. Verse is often highly disciplined language, but—particularly in the contemporary forms Kapil adopts (free verse; prose poetry; associative, collage-like storytelling across multiple scales of spacetime)—it also galvanizes rule-breaking and allows for nonlinear modes of expression. In this way, over the course of *Humanimal*,

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[13] *Hysteria* stems from the ancient Greek *ὑστέρα* (hustérā) meaning "womb" (*OED*).

Kapil's speaker-poet attempts to "[u]nbound" the body of the wolf-girl and to un-"educate" her own understanding of humanimal form. In thinking about how to constructively and radically rehabilitate our cultural and ecological relationships, Joan Retallack claims, "we learn the most about what it can mean to be human from border-transgressive conversations" (2003, p. 2). It is exactly this type of conversation that Kapil instigates for herself and her readers through poetry.

Even at the symbolic level, this act does not come without risk; we must remember, it is when the wolf-girls resist that they are seen as most freakish, most hysterical and most dangerous. Nevertheless, continued resistance is paramount when considering the implications for sisterhood, mothering and female liberation at large—in solidarity with animal and ecological liberation. Stories of humanimal resistance in particular, such as the one Kapil has poetically revitalised, must be kept alive if the wolf-girls of today are to grow into the wild women of tomorrow.

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