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We are not raised by wolves: Decentering human exceptionalism in nature

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Abstract

Some of the earliest writings to which we have access introduce the myth of a human child raised by wolves. Enkidu is the “wild” friend of Gilgamesh in the eponymous Sumerian epic; Romulus and Remus of Rome are the infants who suckle from the she-wolf Lupa; and Mowgli’s story has been told ever since he was conceived by Rudyard Kipling in *The Jungle Book*. While this wolf story might seem to imagine a friendly way of living with other-than-human beings, its contemporary uptake in media also serves as a prop for white supremacist orientations to the myth that reassert the primacy of “human” life, while always determining who counts as human. Nature, on this stage, is a savage, dangerous backdrop against which human cruelties and violence are portrayed as the “survival of the fittest.”

Keywords

Anthropocene, becoming, ecological crisis, ferality, nature, posthumanism, wolf-child

Happy, saccharine stories of multispecies friendship and flourishing are inadequate. (Salazar Parreñas, 2018: 17)

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Expository narration

In 1970, the English rock band The Kinks released an ode to pastoral life. “Apeman” (The Kinks, 1970) was a rejection of the contradictory modernist “development” of human society that created “the city and the motor traffic rumble” and put us at risk of dying in a nuclear war. Their idyllic world imagined the luxurious life of living as ape/man. The Kinks are not alone in their romantic view of nature as antithetical to modern life and as a remedial way of being in the face of proliferating ecological crises.

Some of the earliest writings to which we have access introduce the now seemingly ubiquitous myth of a human child raised by wolves: Enkidu is the “wild” friend of Gilgamesh in the eponymous Sumerian epic; Romulus and Remus are the infants who suckle from the she-wolf Lupa; Mowgli is a character whose story has been told and re-told since he was first conceived of by Rudyard Kipling in *The Jungle Book* (even the cub scouts owe their name to Kipling’s colonial fantasy).

The child-raising wolf myth and the stories told in its contemporary uptake in film and literature discursively mediate understandings of “nature.” These mediated representations create pathways for understanding “the wild” via “wolf stories,” expressing diverging relationships to our shared ecology. Wolves are, Freccero (2015: 112) points out, “asked to stand in for a nostalgia for the wholeness of the human and the natural.” This nostalgia is part of a pre-human desire that reconciles how humans have tried to become wholly separate from the nature of which we are always part.

Iterations of this myth and its uptake in contemporary culture and media are diverse; at its core, we find narratives of a human “return to nature” or “becoming natural.” Taking the wolf-mythos, its mediated representations, and the political uses of wolf stories, this article utilizes the various engagements with the myth as a kind of looking glass through which we can interrogate the larger context of imagining becoming-wolf, its (and subsequently *our*) relationship to nature. In this way, we hope to reimagine both the story of ecological crisis and perhaps its solutions.

One particularly violent uptake of the wolf-mythos comes from white supremacists and various “rouge” political movements who have embraced the Roman origin story to justify their individualistic and nationalistic worldviews. Nature, on this stage, is a savage and dangerous backdrop against which human cruelties and violence are portrayed as the “survival of the fittest.” In this dark version of the environmental script, ecological crisis and resource scarcity are deployed as rationales for ethnonationalist ideologies and practices.

Against this savage view of nature, where the wolf is always violent and “becoming”-wolf means killing anyone outside the nationalistic pack, is a turn to embracing the wolf as an anthropocentric figure that is both in need of human care and provides care for humans. Taken at face value, this embrace of care and kinship offers an emancipatory way of living in or beyond the Anthropocene, yet it ultimately embraces a humanism that centers the “human condition” and the “human” subjects’ rational development and growth in relation to a “nature” that is constantly judged and valued by its usefulness to “man.” Rather than being some posthumanist vision for life beyond rigid categories or speculation, it is a reaffirmation of human exceptionalism that lends itself to justifying the inevitable uptake and embrace of the “violent” wolf story by ethnonationalists.

The narrative logic of child-raising wolves ultimately reasserts human primacy, nationalistic sentiments, and feeds into white supremacist discourses of what constitutes “natural.” These narrative logics around the wolf specifically, and nature generally, are constitutive of an animate political philosophy where wolf-adjacent being/becoming reconfigures the politics of nature. Queer scholars, in particular, have oriented themselves toward an animate political ecology (Weston, 2017), or a political ecology of animacy (Chen, 2012), to explore the lively (and agentic) expressions of life and becoming, and how hierarchies of agency – the naming and delimitation of “who” has agency, often relegated solely to humans – are elements in settler-colonial and white supremacist practices. This is not to say that the white supremacist script of wolf stories ultimately embraces more-than-human philosophical or agential ontologies. Rather, these settler-colonial themes co-opt wolf stories, prioritizing certain kinds of humanity while justifying violent practices as a way out of social ecological crisis.

The myth of child-raising wolves has been taken as true for far too long, and its structural connection to white supremacist understandings of nature and culture has not been adequately interrogated. By discussing the white supremacist uptake of this myth, and the narrative logic of these stories as ultimately reasserting a violent kind of humanism, we pose a question to environmental scholars and queer ecologists writing about the animal or becoming-animal as a kind of liberatory environmental practice. We ask how environmental scholarship can reinvest liberatory politics in animal and humanimal becomings in the face of the hegemonic construction of the animal as primarily violent (like the human whose value it reasserts).

Theoretical mise-en-scène

“The Wild” as an abstracted concept has seen a kind of resurgence in scholarly terrain. Jack Halberstam’s *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* is one evident face of this embrace of “the wild” as a politics. Like many invested in an anarchist political project, Halberstam uses disorder as a productive (and queer) entry point into thinking about the settler-state and being antagonistic to the supposedly ordered state. One figure of this antagonism to the state is the (queer) “wild” child, whose veritably feral becoming-with-wolves enables the child to live outside the constraints of human(ist) epistemologies and practices of being:

The opposite of the pet or domesticated animal is the wild child or the child raised by animals. The wild or feral child emerged as a concept in the eighteenth century after children raised by animals and living separate from human community were discovered on the outskirts of several European towns and villages. These children were often described as impervious to human training; they resisted or were unable to master language acquisition and they retained a preference for raw food and nakedness. Some of these narratives have been dismissed as folktales, others have been explained in terms of the mental or developmental impairment of the child in question, and still more have become the stuff of colonial fantasies that imagine the primitive, such as the classic *Jungle Book*. (Halberstam, 2020: 142–3)

The “wild” is as much ripe for a reimagining along queer political lines as it is central to colonial and xenophobic imagery and discourses (in Halberstam’s articulation through media such as Kipling’s *Jungle Book*). One example of varied responses to wolves, in particular, involves the ostensible regrowth of wolf populations in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. While some use these revitalized canine populations and the stories they provoke to rethink how kinship takes place in radioactive places (Turnbull, 2020), others use wolves’ survival to affirm their militaristic white supremacy. Metonymically, the non-human species population of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone offers a compelling tale in the age of nuclear infrastructures. Surviving under less than desirable conditions, certain animal and plant species have made the exclusion zone *home* (Webster et al., 2016). Mediated representation of wolves via film and literature yokes the canine to a “nature” constructed in post-apocalyptic worlds. Living in the aftermath of loss and destruction in the “wolf” stories is thus integral to how wolves are constructed as “natural” and, in turn, how what *is* natural becomes central to white supremacist understandings of “becoming” wolf.

Storying as environmental method

To engage these polluted narratives and animate the stakes of wolf stories, we take up what van Dooren and Rose (2016: 89) call “lively ethography” (distinct from the ethnographic practices of environmental scholars), a particular take on performative writing that views “storytelling as an ethical practice” with the “understanding that the stories we tell are powerful contributors to the becoming of our shared world.” We are convinced that performatively enacting and engaging with proliferating ecological crises is an ethical, environmental imperative: we cannot forget the lives lost and that will continue to be lost from environmental damage! On the one hand, storytelling is a method of writing we practice; we tell stories to clarify the material dangers we face. On the other hand, we use “storytelling” as a central analytic to understand the narrative logics present in wolf stories.

Storytelling – lively ethography – van Dooren and Rose (2016: 89) tell us:

is about the arts of becoming-witness, which include both attention to others and expression of that experience: to stand as witness and actively to bear witness. As we are seized, so we bear witness in order that others may be seized, telling stories that draw audiences into others’ lives in new and consequential ways, stories that cultivate the capacity for response.

We tap into this rich method for writing, for worlding, to grapple with the stakes of eco-crisis and show the violent uptake inherited in wolf myths.

Twelve years, eleven years, ten years – to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half. Ten years “to prevent irreversible damage from climate change” (UN, 2019). The timeline of the Paris Agreement – obviously intended as a warning about the urgent need to act now to prevent future global warming – has been reduced to a viral media meme and a temporal and ethical deferral that implies “ten years” (even less with each letter we type) means we have nine years and eleven months to act. For the technocrats, energy speculators, and the whims of popular culture, it’s a timeframe that sustains innumerable

fantasies, such as that carbon sequestration, utilization, and capture technologies and infrastructures will be built on time and will be efficient enough to remove gigatons of CO₂ from the global atmosphere annually. Failing that, some have plans to move to Mars.

Storytelling in/about polluted times is a messy affair. Interdisciplinarity is one response to the abundant problems we try to address. In light of this, our analysis of wolf stories is a rhizomatic mapping (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009) of the animal, or the animal as it is socially and materially constructed, in relation to ecological crisis informed by performative writing (Pollock, 1998), queer ecologies (Sandilands and Erickson, 2010; Seymour, 2013), psychoanalysis (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Freud, 2002), and extinction studies (Bird Rose et al., 2017; van Dooren, 2014) – a nascent and interdisciplinary terrain established alongside the work in *environmental humanities*. As collaborators, we find it necessary to sit with “unsettling questions rather than comforting answers” (Alaimo, 2016: 12).

Global warming and ecological crises are simultaneously displaced futures acting on the now (Ahuja, 2015; Parikka, 2018) and radically present (or present/ing) events (Taylor, 2020) that fill our contemporary lifeworlds. Additionally, the temporal delay, “ten years left,” ignores widespread death already happening due to growing ecological crisis and climate displacement. While we do not imagine that we can predict the future, a growing number of coeval crises induce fears over the end of the world: international tensions bubble over with the installing of nationalist and militant governmental leaders; the nuclear threat is not a relic of a 20th-century mindset; global warming-induced effects promote increasingly severe (and occasionally apocalyptic) weather events evinced, for example, by the need for California to issue its first fire-tornado warning; and population displacements from floods, droughts, wildfires, rising sea levels, industrial and nuclear pollution (sacrifice zones), and other environmental calamities, that already threaten global infrastructures unprepared for climate refugees.

While the fire-tornado certainly makes for visual fodder (for those who need more environmental crisis porn), storying is about more than simply visibility. Following Wolfe’s (2010: 169) “critique of the humanist schema of visibility,” performative environmental writing seeks to imbricate all senses, not just the visual, which too often produces an ocular centrality that cannot see beyond what it sees. (This would be akin to suggesting that witnessing children walking a certain way means wolves raised them, but we might be jumping a bit ahead here.)

The longevity of this child-raising wolf myth, and the fantastical worlds it imagines, has given life to a belief in the myth as an authentic and historical event. The search for a “true” feral child and the stories about finding these children on all fours is the zenith of the imagined social imbrication of human and animal worlds. Banu Kapil uses ‘humanimal’ to mark this configuration in her book of poems about the Bengali wolf girls. For Sharon Holland (Holland, 2016: 168), the hum/animal is social worlds in which we purposefully avoid “defining the human against the animal other ... working a potentiality for togetherness that must now bear fruit.” A variety of stories produce this child whose species is a question mark to envision a world devoid of ecological crisis.

In the face of worsening environmental damage, the wolf figure is loaded with a humanist drive that imagines if “we” were more like wolves, maybe things would be different. Cultural contexts speak to one way in which the representations in media are used

to express crisis. Speculative imaginations of extinction from ecological crisis in films range from a human-induced ice age (Bong Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer*), hosts of weather-based events that wipe out large portions of the population (*The Day After Tomorrow*, 2012), a "virus" that wipes out all but a few survivors (Will Forte's *The Last Man on Earth*; Matheson's *I am Legend*), a giant asteroid headed for planet Earth (*Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, *Armageddon*, *How it Ends*) to a cowboy bringing about a nuclear apocalypse riding on a nuclear warhead (*Dr. Strangelove*). Each sci-fi, or cli-fi, film that comprises what Colebrook (2014: 39) describes as a "spate of films of the last decade or more that have been witnessing the possible end of all human life" articulates a particular perspective on the severity and hilarity of ecological crisis, pointing to contemporary fears of extinction. The wolf is one example of the expression of this trend in which telling stories are used to amplify and speak to existing cultural anxieties and fears. Indeed, using media to explore cultural anxieties is central to how people navigate political expression (Holladay and Classen, 2019).

How does one become the wolf?

Position: we were not raised by wolves

One trend in posthumanism (and subsequent connections to environmental humanities) is the rejection of the humanists' ontological separation of humans and animals – a philosophical violence that produces a justification for widespread anthropogenic climate crises (Hamilton, 2015). In light of this, it might be necessary to reconsider the terrain of the "wild" as productive for liberatory environmental politics. Nevertheless, we cannot move "beyond" (if there is a beyond out there) violent modernist tendencies if we fail to confront the ecological investments that rely upon and produce nature as a violent landscape and imagine a polluted social ecology that can be fixed by extending the violence of "nature" to a human terrain (indeed, we must disrupt the very binaries that produce nature/culture as separable). Guattari (2000: 28) maps social and ecological terms together to articulate a deterioration of environmental and social relations where:

men like Donald Trump are permitted to proliferate freely, like another species of algae, taking over entire districts of New York and Atlantic City, thereby driving out tens of thousands of poor families, most of whom are condemned to homelessness, becoming the equivalent of the dead fish of an environmental ecology.

The violent destruction of our (social) ecology by white supremacists like Donald Trump, and his ilk, are firmly imprinted on nature; like some invasive plants, we have to get to its roots if we are to eradicate them from our garden.

Centrally, the wolf-mythos and its uptake in media and white supremacist politics can be explored theoretically via ideas of "becoming," how one imagines becoming-wolf as it lends itself to a particularly pernicious form of violent (and dare we say fascistic) ideological and material violence. "Becoming," a central theoretical engagement for environmental humanities scholars, is not a politically guaranteed concept; instead, its tenets are

being used to imagine a violent wolf-becoming, in which the wolf stands as an ontological figure of violence.

Deleuze and Guattari critique Freud on similar grounds, Freud's use of the wolf as a representative figure of the sexual specter who causes neuropathology is too ontologically certain. For Deleuze and Guattari, Freudian psychoanalysis produces a "wolf" mentality that is primary psychosexual. Criticizing Freud's reliance that any sexual specter bellows "It's daddy!," Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 38) engage Freud's story of the wolf-man toward a more extensive critique of the that psychoanalysis makes on the subject, in which "he or she is deprived of all basis for enunciation." The Wolf-Man cannot name his (sexual) dis/order because he is deprived of the language that (for Freud) would render his dis/order legible. Halberstam (2020: 143) echoes the deprived enunciative power of the wild child who "is wild because it cannot speak, has not become a subject of ideology (yet), and therefore cannot be constrained, incorporated, or even known." The wolf/man/child is made as a subject of psychosexual ideology – when called forth – and forcibly produced as an individuated subject: not quite human, not quite animal, but something (un)recognizable to both. As an element of "becoming" wolf, the wolf-mythos a priori deprives the (human?) child of the defining feature of human (at least for the narrow-minded humanists): language.

Additionally, Freud's wolf is an individualist one that ignores the communal features of wolf life. While Freud thrusts human sexuality and its visibility onto human–animal metamorphosis, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 29) attempt to retain the sexual and libidinal charge of the wolf and becoming-wolf without ridding the wolf of multiplicity or falling into an oedipalized trap by critiquing Freud's inability to conceive of sexuality outside the individualized "daddy-wolf." "Who," Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 28) ask:

is ignorant of the fact that wolves travel in packs? Only Freud. Every child knows it. Not Freud. With false scruples he asks, how are we to explain the fact that there are five, six, or seven wolves in this dream? He has decided that this is neurosis, so he uses the other reductive procedure: free association on the level of the representation of things, rather than the verbal subsumption on the level of the representation of words.

Freud's counterintuitive individualism is at least one instance that gives life to ideas of the "lone wolf."

Without wading too deeply in the psychoanalytic pool of thought (this is not our primary theoretical intervention), it is important to note how the centrality of language, or its imagined centrality to being human, is used as a factor in determining who is a "real" feral child. That is, ascribing limits to the human is used as a violent and reductionist praxis. Primarily, the wolf is propped up via colonial frames. For example, Indigenous relationships to materiality are eradicated via contemporary discourses (Ravenscroft, 2018). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 238), the question of wolf-becoming almost wholly dismisses filial bonds in favor of "veritable becomings." Tiffany Lethabo King (2017: 170), one critic of Deleuze and Guattari's (violent) abstraction, points out how settler-colonial theory erases and is part of the "ongoing genocide to annihilate Native thinkers and subsequently their epistemologies and theories."

Deleuze and Guattari are at least partly guilty for their role in perpetuating colonial violence. Lethabo King implicates Deleuze and Guattari in epistemic violence. What then is to be recuperated (if anything needs to be) from Deleuze and Guattari in thinking about colonial wolf stories? Their commitment to becoming and the ongoing, rather than the ontologically certain, has undoubtedly inspired a wide array of environmental thinkers. While Deleuze and Guattari limit themselves to a becoming that precludes filiation, unimaginatively dismissing it as only connected to blood, we can open up becoming and kinship to animal terrain (as the human-raising wolf story demands). Disarticulating community and ancestral belonging under the aegis of “blood” has been used for too long as a weapon in the violent colonial toolkit. Becoming is at once a symbolic order and material order.

“Becoming” is a practice and sedimentation of materio-discursive orders (Barad, 2003, 2007), but its material implications do not mean it is without metaphor or abstraction. Wright’s (2014: 279–80) “Becoming-With,” an entry for the *Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities*, points out that “becomings are neither imitation, nor literal transformation,” that is:

in becoming-dog one does not acquire fur or paws, but becomes attuned to a multiplicity of worlds through encounter with a new relational context – a doggish *Umwelt*. In other words, we become-with life as it is manifested through the body of another, and lives are always connected to worlds.¹

Still, for others, becoming is rooted in a materiality of transforming with and alongside. Haraway (2008: 3–4) revels in the molecular that exposes the limits of human supremacy, opting to note how our DNA changes in relation to our doggish *Umwelt* (to use Wright’s framing in which “*Umwelt*” is a sensorial experience of the world):

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm.

Additionally, Haraway (2003: 31) paints the picture of an entangled dance of microscopic cellular relations, “immune systems are not a minor part of naturecultures; they determine where organisms, including people, can live and with whom. The history of the flu is unimaginable without the concept of the co-evolution of humans, pigs, fowl, and viruses.” The environmental ecological and the social ecological (the arrangement of social relations) are thus always bound up in a relation of becomings (some of them more material, some of them less so).

Becomings are a tension between the embodied and corporeal (Massumi, 2014), but there are limits to corporeal transformations ingrained within the potentiality to become an/other. For example, Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* “gives an account of the material nature of the human body without reinstalling the body’s materiality as foundational or self-evident” (Barad, 2007: 191). What a body is, or can become, is subject to the

endless pull of the ideological terrain, and while the body can strive to challenge hegemony, how we name a body is part of the interpellative call of language. Becoming other is contested terrain, and the fantasy of becoming looms large in contemporary discourses of “nature.”

“Nature” itself is part of a materio-discursive order that produces some things as natural while others are not quite so. Williams (1980: 67) asks, “when we say nature, do we mean to include ourselves?” Williams is primarily concerned here with the abundant meanings of nature. For example, Williams (1980: 77) talks about nature as “all that was not touched by man, spoiled by man: nature as the lonely places, the wilderness”; the wild as “essentially peaceful and quiet.” Williams attunes us toward the multiplicity of meanings made under that overdetermined form “nature.” If we are to explore the abundant ways that the wolf stands as a metonym and representation of pure nature, then we must articulate the abstract ideas of nature to the material conditions that are made from this understanding.

Who was raised by wolves?

Stated against a humanist linguistic schema, what wolves have raised which children?

Romulus and Remus? Mowgli? Me? We? While an incomplete genealogy, a brief Google search suggests that the trope of (human) child-rearing animals exists in one of the oldest pieces of literature of which we are aware, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.² Another iteration of this myth is the founding of Rome in which a wolf-mother raised two babies, Remus, and Romulus, who would later go on to build the city of Rome. While there is an uptake of the “wolf,” wild, or even rewilding, which centers the leftist posthumanist vision that decenters the human, a key feature of the child-raising wolf is how the animal ultimately serves a human-oriented version of how things are and ought to be. Further, the myth ultimately centers the teleology of human “progression,” in which the ultimate endpoint is the creation of human society (as it is in the case of the Roman origin story).

There is a crucial tension in this myth. On the one hand, the material reality of wolf stories (if they are to be taken as true) are incredibly violent – the Bengali wolf girls story exemplifies this. Kapil’s *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* (2009: 55) details one such moment of violence, “both children, the wolfgirls, were given a fine yellow powder to clean their kidneys but their bodies, having adapted to animal ways of excreting meat, could not cope with this technology. Red worms came out of their bodies and the younger girl died.”

On the other hand, the contemporary uptake of this myth and proliferation in media paints the story as a joyful one (“forget about your worries and your strife ... old Mother Nature’s recipes,” at least that’s what Disney wants us to believe). One way this has happened is through the Disneyfication, “the production of simulacra of national cultures; and tourism, the industry that organizes the consumption of those simulacra and those spectacles or images” of this myth via film (Jameson, 2009: 379). Centrally, Jameson features nostalgia as a way of accessing culture. “Disneyfication” works as

both a playful term to indicate nostalgia for an imagined culture but also as a literal description of the dissemination of this myth to willing consumers.

In the foreword to *Wolf-Children and Feral Man*, a text that begins with the story of the Bengali “wolfgirls,” R. Ruggles Gates (Gates, 1942: xiii) assures us that the evidence is conclusive, despite the fact that the Romulus and Remus story is a myth, because it was “founded upon earlier myths, which presumably had an ultimate substratum of truth.” The *honor* of religious colonizers supplants the *truth* of this myth, marking it as a story with primarily colonial affects/effects.

This myth perverts key tropes within environmental studies. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin (2019: 125–6), who lay out a field of debate for the Anthropocene as a geological epoch, discuss the centrality of bipedality to human evolution: “Early human evolution can be simplified into four main stages ... the first step is the evolution of bipedalism, our ability to walk upright on two legs, which gave us the ability to travel vast distance.” The evolution and repetition of bipedality is one performative that marks human difference. Think here about our wolf-raised friend Mowgli, whose story Disney has adapted into a film more than once. Mowgli’s bipedality (and his use of tools) shows the animals that he is not quite a member of the pack. Alternatively, eschewing bipedality can be used as a heuristic to prove the wolf nature of the child. For the Bengali wolfgirls, their purported quadrupedal nature materially and performatively signified the lack of human sociality/encounters. “They were able to crawl,” the proselytizer Reverend Joseph Singh (1942: 12) – upon whose word the story of the wolfgirls is based and taken as truth – tells us. In the case of another *true* feral child, “he was found on all fours in the company of wolf cubs” (Bumiller, 1985). There is a literal transfiguration that is assumed in this part of the myth, where other-than-human ways of moving/being/living signify radical alterity – if one can’t walk on two feet, the child must have been raised by some animal, the myth seems to suggest. Like other aspects of this myth, more than signifying some legitimate lupine mother (of a human child), the materiality of the myth seems to suggest violence enacted upon the child by its human communities.

For environmental scholar Sandilands (2014: 167), what we consume can relationally expand our worlds. Sandilands focuses on the material relationship and “intense corporality of bee–human relationality, and of the particular ways in which bee and human biopolitics are intertwined: how we organize environments for pollination registers not only in bee welfare but also in human taste.” Exposure to honey is also a cartographic exposure, where honey provides:

a sort of taste map of bee geography and temporality; depending on where the bees have been and the particular flowers from which their nectar has been drawn, we experience bee-relevant places and times through *taste* ... honey can provide a sort of taste experience of bee *Umwelt*. (Sandilands, 2014: 167)

In the story of the wolfgirls, their supposed predilection for meat assured the religious colonizers that these children could be something other-than-human.³ Eco-feminists (Adams, 1990) implicate masculinity and (reckless) meat consumption in the exploitation of women and animals. This position, against the mythos of the wolves, suggests that it is less about some abstracted becoming-wolf that is an essentialist environmental politics,

and more about the recognition of how one influences their ecosystems. While some environmentalists might be drawn to the abundant multispecies kin-making inherent in the potentiality of the myth, it ultimately fails to advance ethical, environmental politics.

The Jungle Book navigates ostensible biological markers between species in which Mowgli's bipedality marks him as significantly different from his adoptive (wolf) parents. Kipling's story is routinely criticized for its colonial overtures, and rightfully so. We bring it up here to point out the structural logic at play that both marks the difference between animals as ontologically guaranteed and also assumes that animals want to be like *man*. To be raised by wolves, *The Jungle Book* tells us, is to be around animals who want to be just like you, and the goal is to fight back against these human certainties (like using tools, what some members of his pack will call his "tricks"). Nature, in Kipling's story, is all about destruction, and a human imbued with wolf characteristics is all that can save the world. Being violent, then, or having the potential for violence is actually, in Kipling's world, the only thing you can do to live.

Tarzan, initially, reads as a critique of Western industrialism and the temporality of industrial life, what Pryor (2017) calls "straight time," the forceful organization of life's flows in relation to the production of profit. In the film, Professor Porter and Jane exit English Society (the overdetermined stand-in for all of humanity). Before this exit, the professor and Jane attempt to produce Tarzan as a successfully colonized subject, one that produces an eroticism for the other in the *good* colonist, Jane. It is the failure to successfully colonize Tarzan as a good English subject that helps the professor and Jane realize the potential for their entry into "jungle" life. This produces, much like industrialism, nature as meant for human consumption and actions. Simply reassessing the relationship to industrialism does not lead to reassessing the place of humans in relation to nature. As one example of the child-raising animal mythos, Tarzan imagines a human world that can do whatever it wants to nature and, when nature finally pushes back, pretending that it is enough just to sit back and enjoy the view.

Even the attempts to move beyond the "Disneyfied" expression of this trope in media ultimately fail to address the colonial practices inherent in the myth. Kapil's *Humanimal* and Julia Fullerton-Batten's (Macdonald, 2015) photographic series ultimately assert there is some truth to the child-raising animal myth, simultaneously reasserting the centrality of *humans* to animal worlds and invoking a nostalgia for more animalistic times. The stories that attempt to show the violence cannot fully capture it because there is an affect of nostalgia present in the obsession with the "legitimate" possibility of a wolf/child/hybrid. The goal of this endeavor is to capture the "real" feral child, not to prevent the violent condition like child abuse that are more likely the culprit for feral children than an imaginary child-raising wolf.

White supremacy and wolves

The far-right has an obsession with wolf iconography, and public discourse has an obsession with the image of the "lone wolf."⁴ Several far-right organizations take as their name some variation of "wolf"; for instance, "Wolf Brigade 44," a far-right group banned in Germany, or "Grey Wolves," a Turkish far-right organization. Like many other groups, the Oath Keepers – a United States-based far-right cell – advocates for a lone-

wolf strategy of violence. The media uncritically uses the “lone wolf” in relation to organized right-wing shootings and violence.

Recently, academics have noticed the right’s interest in the classics. Writing in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, Shadi Bartsch (2021) refuses to cede the classics to the far-right. The Roman origin story and its centrality to the far-right’s identity are missing from the general discussion about the far-right’s renewed interest in the classics. Given the far-right’s obsession with wolves, it makes sense to question how the Roman origin story might connect to the far-right’s desire to re-make the world in its image.

Wolves, one animal among others, are imbued with colonial eroticism and colonizing force. Is it any wonder that the colonial script of wolf stories inevitably involves some type of psychosexual nation-building? In the story of Romulus and Remus, they suckle on a she-wolf in the Lupercal cave, the place upon which they would eventually find Rome. Romulus’ wolf upbringing enabled him to build the city where violence and rape seemed to be celebrated. The Roman celebration of bloody, violent, libidinal/sexual energy – Lupercalia – also bears the name of the cave where Romulus and Remus were suckled. Living “like the wolf” here is a masculinist vision that props up colonial fantasies of rape and wanton violence. Additionally, the Roman origin story suggests the fallibility of order and domesticity, exposing that domesticity is only made possible because of the threat of violence and ferality (perhaps one reason the contemporary right and center left in the US continue to justify absurd amounts of spending on police).

The call for a return to masculinity on the far-right is certainly connected to their vision of social ecological decline. The eco-fascist perspective is one that uses a false narrative of overpopulation to enact xenophobic violence (Ahuja, 2015) and demands a genocidal commitment to white supremacy. Reproduction is quite central to wolf discourses then, where wolves are made into embodied actors of monogamous social, straight (and white) reproduction while xenophobic discourses surrounding the parasite implicate immigrants (as one example) in ideas of unhealthy reproduction. Like the wolf species repopulating Chernobyl, the far-right wolves imagine populating their world into purity. Indeed, the far-right has co-opted some idea of natural purity to advance their ideological position. We are thinking here of recent anti-vaxxer movements connected both to Covid-19 and other vaccines. Anti-GMO (genetically modified organisms) proponents also often use calls for a pure nature to which they wish they could return.

One recent face of this human (white and Western) subject advancing white supremacist notions of nature is the “QAnon Shaman,” Jake Angeli, whose wardrobe for the violent insurrection at the US Capitol placed him in connection with animals (of course, as the conqueror of those animals) and his subsequent demand for organic food was ridiculed. Those ridiculing his demand for “organic” food fail to see the back-to-nature philosophy that is the backdrop for certain far-right ideologies. In this view, as outlined at the beginning of the article, nature is a violent state of being that serves as the justification for societal violence. Marking the pages and chyrons of too many print and televisual media outlets, the “lone-wolf” fantasy lets white supremacists off the hook for their eco-fascistic violence.

The Freudian use of the lone wolf’s connection to adolescent repression is widespread in (at least) the United States to partially justify the actions of angry (and white and cis male) young mass murderers. The “innocence” of the lone-wolf narrative quite adeptly

helps accomplish reckless violence and extraction built upon an individualistic worldview. Rather than being wholly ignorant of environmental or ecological language, the far-right has polluted discourses of “nature” to accomplish an ideological and violent mission, where becoming-animal, or becoming-wolf, is about a relationship between guns and violence that promotes xenophobic goals.

Conclusion

To return to the epigraph that marks the beginning of this essay, “Happy, saccharine stories of multispecies friendship and flourishing are inadequate” (Salazar Parreñas, 2018: 17). We are always-already in relation to animals, always becoming-with and becoming-animal, but this is not an environmental politics. “Becoming-with” as a relational ontology does not inherently map onto an ethical, environmental politics; the continued task of environmental scholars is one of cartography, mapping how a relational world can lead to more liberatory ecological practices without assuming they do so *prima facie*. We need something more if we are to combat the co-optation of the animal and environmental discourses by the right. The wolf, in particular, makes salient the relationship between the far-right view of nature and the demand for a violent social ecological reckoning that actors on the right imagine as the way to remediate (social) ecological crisis.

Socioecological discourses rely upon the wolf as a symbol of violence (and ferality) as a condition of nature that justifies human violence – child-rearing wolves are one “spectacular” story that gets told repeatedly. If we, as environmental theorists, allow ourselves to be ensorcelled (or, worse, blinded to these stories) by a version of nature with humans at the center to the detriment of everything else, we are bound to reproduce the violence that comes with this mythos and its prominent place in ecological thinking. In articulating the animal as the backdrop against which various political groups and theoretical traditions evoke a closeness to or alienation from nature, we have sought to provide another path forward for queer ecologists and environmental humanities scholars to focus our theoretical frames and deal with the question of humanimal relationships. In part, we hope that we can push back against the violent storying of the wolf by far-right actors, whose view of nature produces immense violence, and drive forward ecological theory that does not assume a politics inherent in *the animal*.

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Notes

1. See: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/5/1/277/8177/Becoming-with>

2. As a method, Google searches are, as Cary Wolfe (2010) points out an “appropriately posthuman gesture.”
3. Environmental movements (particularly those on the left) have turned their attention to consumption practices and their relationship to ecocrises. For instance, criticisms of the consumption of meat are growing and “meat alternatives” is a growing industry attempting to keep up with the demand for food practices that do not involve the death of animals. Still, there are increasing numbers of people convinced that the way to live harmoniously with nature is to buy land and start a farm. One articulation of this trend is “cottage core.”
4. For a further discussion of the “lone-wolf” narrative see Lavin (2021).

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