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Title: Tracking The Wolf

Review of **Peter Arnds, *Wolves at the Door: Migration, Dehumanization, Rewilding the World* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021). 232 pp., ISBN 9781501366765, paperback $29.95, hardback $120.00.**

In 2016 hardcore supporters of Donald Trump frothed at undocumented migrants that "the wolves are coming, and you are the hunted". In 1290 a Shropshire knight is said to have slaughtered England's last remaining wolf, paving the way for an agricultural revolution that would rearrange the landscape around sheep farming. In 8 AD Ovid narrated the story of Lycaon, the king of Arcadia, who found himself transformed into a wolf after he was caught serving human flesh to Jove.

These are three disparate and distant stories of human–wolf relations. Yet according to Peter Arnds they all form part of the same cultural history, a history of belonging, borders and hospitality in which wolves play a significant role. In *Wolves at the Door: Migration, Dehumanization, Rewilding the World* Arnds argues that the species *canis lupus* has been uniquely appropriated across human history. From ancient civilizations to early capitalism, from European fascism to the conservation movement, the wolf has become a "global metaphor" (p. 2), a figure of concomitant destruction and compassion, "ambivalent in its tension between reverence and hatred" (p. 5). Arnds sets himself the task of unpacking the valences of the wolf, "tracing the history of this metaphor via myth, literary texts, political rhetoric, film and visual culture" (p. 5).

The book's politics are manifestly cosmopolitan. Arnds makes it clear that he is writing in response to the reactionary conjuncture of the late 2010s, a time characterized by the Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump and the so-called refugee crisis. During this time, Arnds says, he was struck by the ways in which the ascendant new

right, from elected politicians to fascist internet trolls, enlisted a metaphorics of the wolf in its dehumanizing anti-migrant politics. Arnds, the author of a previous book on werewolves in German literature, felt compelled to track this metaphorics and thus narrate a global study of the wolf itself. “How does the wolf metaphor itself migrate over time and through space”, he asks, “and what happens interculturally, interethnically during that process?” (p. 5). Mounting a defence of wolves and migrants, he declares his book’s aim: “to raise awareness about xenophobia, racism and the damage the wolf myth perpetuates for these animals and humans alike” (p. 5).

This is a work not just of cultural history, then, but one of comparative criticism and conceptual genealogy. By offering an analytical “interspecies comparison” (p. 5) of humans and wolves, Arnds wishes to deconstruct the rhetorical entanglements of xenophobia and lycophobia. Across the book’s seven chapters Arnds analyses how wolves function in, for instance, the antisemitism of Renaissance tragedies and Victorian gothic novels; the depiction of colonial genocides and ecocides in American fiction; the construction of gender in fairy tales; the popular novels of Nazi Germany; and the rewilding imaginaries of contemporary world literature. Arnds examines political rhetoric, twentieth-century Hollywood cinema and contemporary sculptural works, pointing out all the while “how easily the metaphor can switch between wolf reverence and wolf hatred, in colonial and postcolonial power structures, and in different contexts of dehumanization” (p. 8).

Yet of these two sides, reverence and hatred, *Wolves at the Door* focuses mostly on the latter, negative figuration of the wolf, contending that this imaginary has mostly served reactionary ethno-nationalisms: “the time-worn human fear of wolves, of their alleged hunger, greed and bloodlust, metaphorically of a predator attacking the nation’s body, seems to offer itself as a suitable image to reflect fears of foreigners invading our well-guarded nation states” (p. 2). Arnds hypothesizes that this conception of the wolf

as a menace has its origins in the historical transition from nomadic communities to settled agricultural societies. From this moment on, he suggests, the wolf has been seen as an animal that troubles the material and ideological borders of the *polis*. Whether in times of imperial expansion or border-tightening retrenchment, Arnds argues, the wolf has been represented as an unruly other, a foreigner, a trespasser, an outsider, a “symbol of uncontrollable nature outside of the space of dwelling” (p. 11).

It is this territorial ideology, Arnds argues, that connects the wolf to the migrant. In early civilization, “as the wolf came to be considered a parasite, so were invasive tribes, since with settlement came property and with property came strife over turf and theft” (p. 11). In the Germanic Middle Ages this association was mythologized as criminals exiled from the community were cast as “*vargr i veum*” (p. 13), that is, as wolves who at once require and threaten sanctuary. In the early modern period the wolf became a symbol of racial dehumanization, symbolically identified with “so-called Gypsies and Jews” who were “stigmatized as wolves trespassing upon sedentary communities, appearing as marauding thieves, cannibals, child devourers and seducers of young women” (p. 30). Arnds consolidates this argument in Chapter Two, during which he perceptively tracks how Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, the product of anxieties about “racial pollution, of the nation being drained by Eastern European immigrants” (p. 45), imagines wolves as threatening both “the peace of the community” and “the civilizing mission” of the nation itself (p. 26).

Although Arnds focuses on the wolf as a disparaged and disavowed figure, he also deliberately chooses a corpus of texts and events “that resist and act against the wolf’s demonization and the language of dehumanization” (p. 23). This is most clearly seen in Chapter Three, in which Arnds contrasts north American settler texts with indigenous depictions of human–wolf relations. His analysis really comes alive in a comparative reading of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918) and Louise Erdrich’s *The Painted Drum*

(2005), in which he foregrounds how Erdrich negotiates her position as an indigenous novelist within the American canon through her particular literary incorporations of wolves.

By exploring texts such as Erdrich's *The Painted Drum*, Jian Rong's *Wolf Totem* (2004) and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978), sculptures like Rainer Opolka's *Die Wölfe sind zurück*, and the histories of wolf reintroduction programmes in locations like Yellowstone, Arnds hopes that "these glimpses into the history of the perception of wolves and migrants may contribute to making us lose our fear of the foreign, think beyond borders, in terms of a politics of hospitality, biodiversity and world citizenship" (p. 201). If the wolf metaphor "reflects a persistence over time and space in biopolitics that strips both migrants and wolves … of their right to obtain sanctuaries" (p. 6), then Arnds submits this metaphor to a mode of deconstruction, historicization and problematization that promises to break the rhetorics of dehumanization.

Even so, *Wolves at the Door* never quite substantiates its own claim that wolves in particular, above all other animals, are rhetorically recruited into xenophobic politics. What is conceived of here as a single history reads, at times, like a series of well-chosen examples that, while interconnected, are not convincingly theorized as continuous episodes in a unified story. Moreover, despite pitching the book as "an experiment in deconstructing the boundaries between human and non-human animal as well as between biodiversity and cultural diversity" (p. 6), Arnds rarely looks beyond the figure of the wolf itself to consider the broader dichotomy between historical modalities of personhood, or political humanity, and its structurally dehumanized and animalized others. Arnds rightly points out that migrants are continually characterized in the media as hordes, swarms, and floods. He pushes hard to claim that these "parasitic, predatory" (p. 1) metaphors are, underneath it all, derivatives of a multi-generational and transnational prejudice against wolves. But these naturalizing and biblical metaphors

are not especially wolfish, nor are they even exclusively animal. How, then, might the figure of the wolf operate within a broader historically-shapeshifting system of dehumanization that is undergirded by the figuration of animals?

There are also moments of stylistic and scholarly inattentiveness that obscure the book's arguments and impede its narrative: the repetition of words and phrases; a handful of comma splices; incomplete sentences; the duplication of examples and arguments; and a superficial engagement with some key texts. The phrase "time-worn", for example, becomes rather time-worn itself after being deployed some sixteen times. The verb "denigrate" is transitive, so it's not quite right to say that Shylock "is repeatedly denigrated to a dog" (p. 30). Arnds writes that the wolf is an "engendered" construct (pp. 19, 81, 95) without unpacking what he means. Nor does he define some of the project's key concepts: "biopolitics" and "populism" are two heavily debated theoretical terms, but here they are taken for granted. Finally, Arnds states that the former British Prime Minister David Cameron "famously invoked Kafka's story" (p. 138) *The Metamorphosis* when he referred to migrants crossing the Mediterranean as "swarms". David Cameron is many things, but a reader of Kafka he is not.

Most salient is Arnds's engagement with Jacques Derrida's writing on human–animal relations. Arnds tells us that Derrida's work is fundamental to animal studies, describing his late texts on animality as both "famous" (p. 64) and "seminal" (p. 177). Yet Arnds never seriously grapples with Derrida's thought. Instead, he writes rather superficially that Claude Frollo from Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* "embodies Derrida's wolf as sovereign" (p. 43), that *Little Red Riding Hood* "remind[s] us of Jacques Derrida's equation of the sovereign with the beast" (p. 89), and that "Derrida's sovereign as wolf comes to mind" (p. 142) in passages of Sarah Hall's *The Wolf Border*. Towards the end of the book Arnds belatedly introduces Derrida's *Beast and the Sovereign* lecture series, but only for the purposes of validating his argument that

"[s]overeignty is inextricably linked to abjection" (p. 152). Readers unfamiliar with Derrida's work will be left mystified by all this, unclear about what is at stake in this proximity between beast and sovereign.

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am* Derrida insists that the cat he is talking about, the cat that precipitates his meditation on humans and animals, is a real cat, "truly a little cat". In *Wolves at the Door*, however, Arnds rarely spells out the relationship between figuration, taxonomy and concrete reality. He does not delineate the differences between the global metaphor of the wolf, the species category wolf, and the embodied lives of actual wolves. To be sure, Arnds does say that "the wolf metaphor … has little to do with the reality of wolves" (p. 9). Yet excepting a belated excursion on Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* in the book's epilogue Arnds does not theorize how the role of myth might produce or determine particular ways of treating other species. Nor does he have much to say about real wolves themselves, declaring at one point that he will "leave [this topic] to the experts in zoology" (p. 32).

Wolves at the Door resolutely follows the metaphorics of the wolf, its different figurations and appropriations. Yet in doing this the book often loses sight of wolves themselves. Arnds may question the ways in which wolves are conscripted into "one-dimensional myths" (p. 97), but he ends up characterizing wolves, real wolves that is, as ambivalent figures, as "devourers" with "nurturing qualities" and "instincts" (pp. 19; 12). *Wolves at the Door* thus pluralizes the myth that it claims to problematize, ultimately reinscribing the fossilizing notion that species possess a distinctive and innate essence.