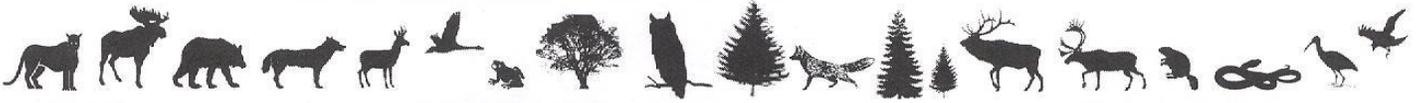

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Point to Ponder

Aligning Coyote and Human Welfare

Alexandra BOESEL¹ and Shelley ALEXANDER¹

¹ University of Calgary, Earth Science Building, Canid Conservation Lab, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, Canada.

Abstract

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) have adapted and learned to live alongside humans but not without cost. Seen as a pest, nuisance or biosecurity threat, coyotes often receive indirect or direct violence from the communities they live alongside with. It is our position that the values and behaviours justifying violence towards coyotes energize the same systems of oppression responsible for the marginalization of other groups (such as Indigenous peoples, non-male genders, differently-abled, people of colour, etc.). Herein, we liken the systemic violence that coyotes experience to that enacted against marginalized human groups. We argue that speciesism is foundational to the treatment of coyotes and that this structural oppression must be interrogated as we would racism, classism and sexism. Next, we suggest that both human and wildlife welfare need to be considered jointly in future conservation efforts, as the oppression of marginalized human and nonhuman animal groups are often linked. We conclude that structural changes in academia, wildlife management policies, and grassroots education are essential to dismantling traditions of violence towards coyotes.

Correspondence: Alexandra Boesel, University of Calgary, Earth Science Building, Canid Conservation Lab, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, Canada. Email: Alexandra.boesel1@ucalgary.ca

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INTRODUCTION

Canada prides itself as a welcoming, supportive and inclusive nation (Wolfson 2018). Yet, this sense of community and compassion has limitations, often not extending to all species. Within Alberta, iconic species (such as grizzly *Ursos arctos* and caribou *Rangifer tarandus*) are celebrated and protected (Proulx and Brook 2017; Lukasik 2018), while others (such as cows *Bos spp.*) are farmed and harvested, considered essential to human economies and health. Certainly, our domestic canine companions (*Canis lupus familiaris*) are given an elevated status, often invited into our homes and intimately cared for (Haraway 2008). While domestic canids are treated as family members, wild canids like coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are labeled a pest and threat (Alberta Agriculture and Forestry 2017). This multi-species comparison demonstrates a common Western-colonial hierarchy of socially and historically-contextualized roles extended to various animal species (Kim 2015). For many coyotes in North America, the results of this constructed hierarchy are violent—coyotes are subjected to cyanide, strychnine, leg traps, bounties and more (Proulx and Rodtka 2015; Lukasik 2018; Paquet and Alexander 2018).

The differences in value of species and constructed hierarchy we present above is an example of speciesism (Emel 1995; Elder, et al. 1998; Kim 2015). In this essay, we explore how speciesism results in systemic violence towards coyotes. We discuss how rhetoric is used to reinforce species differences, even more so between humans and an animal that poses a perceived threat, such as a coyote. We also touch on the rules of “place” that reinforce where coyotes are allowed, and when they are deemed to be trespassing. Paralleling the experiences of some human groups, we conclude that speciesism, a powerful system of oppression, cannot be ignored. Any choice to grapple deeply with coyote welfare must acknowledge and eventually overcome speciesism and other related oppressions.

COYOTES – A SYSTEMICALLY PERSECUTED GROUP

Essential to deconstructing marginalization of coyotes (as with any persecuted group) is the understanding that categories of difference, such as species (or race, gender, and more within human bounds) are historically and socially constructed (Gaard 1993; Plumwood 1993; Elder et al. 1998; Kim 2015). In this comparison of power structures, we do

not contend that coyotes are the same as people in any way, nor that coyote suffering is the same as human suffering. Our intent is to expose that the mechanisms of oppression of marginalized humans is paralleled in the oppression of animals (i.e., coyotes) as a result of speciesism. All are systems produced by societal constructs that are presented as facts and used to legitimize power disparities between groups (in this case species).

While experiences of marginalization are different for coyotes and people, both suffer from indirect systemic sources of subjugation and direct, violent persecution (Plumwood 1993; Emel 1995; Kim 2015). This process of systemic persecution is evidenced in the history of Wildlife Services Division of the United States Department of Agriculture, which once named coyotes “the arch predator of our time”. By casting coyotes as something to fear, and in need of human control, coyotes are made what Spivak (1985) refers to as the “other”, worthy of little consideration and in this case, widespread elimination (Kim 2015). The agency declared all-out war on the species for decades during the 1900s, using strychnine, compound 1080, sodium cyanide, and more (Flores 2016). Their efforts were responsible for the lives of millions of coyotes, and likely hundreds of thousands of non-target species lives (Flores 2016).

While studies have since made it clear that coyotes are not a significant predator for most ungulate species, Wildlife Services continues to detain over a hundred coyotes for experimental of lethal and non-lethal methods of control. In the field, Wildlife Services (at the behest of the ranchers they primarily serve) opt mostly for lethal methods such as aerial hunting, Compound 1080 sheep collars, and sodium cyanide-filled M44 devices (Flores 2016). For coyotes in Canada, the past decade has been marked with the violence of municipal bounties and killing contests such as the “10th Annual Furbuster Coyote Derby”, “3rd Annual Whack Em’ N’ Stack Em’ Coyote Derby” and “Coyote Tournament”, all promising various prizes, including ones for the “smallest” and “mangiest” coyotes killed (Marriot 2015; Reiger 2016).

Willing to spend millions of taxpayer dollars, handing out prizes, and bounties, it is clear that in many parts of Canada and the United States, coyotes are still seen as more valuable dead, rather than alive. This devaluing of coyote lives, and subsequent large-scale human persecution of a species indicates a clear, violent system of oppression. In the following section, we will elaborate on how tools of rhetoric

and place are used to legitimize speciesism, and other forms of oppression.

TOOLS OF OPPRESSION— RHETORIC AND PLACE

Since the arrival of European colonialists centuries ago, coyotes have been viewed by many as pests or security threats, and are unwelcomed in many human communities (Emel 1995; Flores 2016; Eichler and Baumeister 2018; Lukasik 2018). As a result of this persistent and negative rhetoric, coyotes, perhaps more than any other carnivore species in North America, have been socially constructed to be “disposable” creatures (Kim 2015). Relevant governing bodies sustain this doxa (or common belief) through the ascription of “pest” designation (Alberta Agriculture and Forestry 2017) and by providing bounty for coyotes and their close relatives, grey wolves (*Canis lupus*), against advice from the majority of the scientific community (Cresswell 1996; Haber 1996; Proulx and Rodtka 2015; Chapron and Treves 2016).

One common rhetoric used to advance the theory that coyotes are a pest and do not belong is the label “invasive”. A widespread perception, this assumption is faulty. Coyotes were once ubiquitous in North America. Decreases in distribution tracked with larger ecological changes, such as the last great ice age. Having reclaimed their pre-glacial and pre-colonial distribution in North America (Wang et al. 2008), coyotes are often referred to as “invasive”. It appears that these perceptions are less rooted in the fossil records, and more in human perceptions – particularly fear.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for this perception of invasiveness to be used to suggest someone or some group does not belong. Here, the rhetoric used to assert that coyotes are “invasive” often parallels the arguments and language used to assert that immigrants are not welcome, and represent a threatening invasion (Subranium 2001). This social construction of who “belongs” or poses a “threat” has legitimized systemic violence towards human groups (Cresswell 1996), and we argue that similar dynamics (in part) legitimize violence against coyotes (Subranium 2001).

On a smaller scale, even in areas where they are accepted as part of the local fauna, coyotes are again considered out of “place” when in or near human communities or amongst domestic animals (Alexander and Draper 2019). Cresswell (1996) explored this societal construct of place in reference to humans, particularly along race, class and gendered lines; he described the unwritten rules that determine different individuals’ sense of wellbeing within a place and their security, or lack thereof. Historically, and currently, rules of place have been used to segregate, imprison, enslave,

persecute and violently abuse marginalized human groups (Cresswell 1996). A product of social hierarchy, they serve to keep a privileged group in power at the welfare and even lives of a marginalized group (Cresswell 1996). Condemning this social hierarchy within humans, we believe it to be problematic and synergistically related when these hierarchies extend across species divides, and legitimize further violence (Kim 2015).

Extending this notion of place to coyotes (Alexander and Draper 2019), our lab has characterized the unwritten social contract that humans use to define where coyotes should live, how they should behave, and when and how they should be punished (killed or harassed). These rules of place are expressed by the identification of transgressive acts by coyotes and the prescribed punishment for rule breaking; the acts are multiple, but involve things like threatening livestock, denning too closely to humans, acting with aggression towards humans or pets, etc. Like perceived transgressions of humans deemed out of place (Cresswell 1996), the consequence of rule breaking is marginalization and violence; coyotes in particular are harassed, tortured or killed (Alexander and Draper 2019). As mentioned earlier in this essay, the killing most often extends beyond the individual perceived “transgressor” to the species itself.

Labeled a pest and a threat, and perceived as either invasive or out of place, scant consideration has been given to understand what a coyote’s experience of a human-modified landscape might be (Paquet and Alexander 2018). While evidence suggests that some coyotes have expanded their territory due to increased resources near human settlement (Flores 2016), these theories often have the unintended consequence of fueling a perception that coyotes are thriving in human-dominated landscapes. This narrative also does not acknowledge that some biologists theorize that coyotes may have turned to cities to escape large-scale predator-killing campaigns in more agrarian regions (Flores 2016). Whatever the reason for coyotes’ “urbanization”, we can surmise it is not an easy life for an urban coyote. Paquet and Alexander (2018) anticipate that habitat loss, change and learning how to live with humans are stressful experiences for coyotes because the process involves adaptation to regular intentional and non-intentional violence.

Given the vast biological similarities between human and non-human mammals, we can liken the world of many coyotes to that of marginalized human communities that are displaced, traumatized, or forced to adapt to colonial systems through processes of physical and emotional violence (Dawkins 2006). Similar conjecture was put forward by Clint McKay of Wappo, Wintun and Dry Creek Pomo Indian Tribes (Fox 2017). In an interview with Project Coyote, McKay reacted to coyote wildlife killing contests by saying,

“The part... that really hits home and really resonates with us native people is... we’ve lived that ourselves... We’ve been that coyote. We’ve been that predator. We’ve been that misunderstood scourge of the earth. And it’s something that we are still dealing with. You know a lot of people think that those are days gone by. But we know better” (Fox 2017).

STRONGER TOGETHER—ALIGNING HUMAN AND COYOTE WELFARE

Echoing McKay’s (Fox 2017) sentiments, we contend that systems of oppression often produce similar results: structurally subjugating indigenous peoples, in the case of colonialism, and coyotes, in the case of speciesism. These systems of oppression are not just similar in their mechanisms but are synergistically related (Kim 2015). For example, speciesism has been used as rationale for marginalizing human groups, by “de-humanizing” them, or even making comparisons of different races to animals (Kim 2015). Killing predator species in the name of preserving valuable game stock is not only speciesist but also colonialist, a wildlife management strategy born of predominantly white male values, disregarding Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of relating to nonhuman animals (Emel 1995; Tallbear 2015; Eichler and Baumeister 2017). These comparisons show that systems of oppression often coincide, building upon each other to further legitimize the marginalization of human and nonhuman animal groups (Kim 2015). Intertwined, when humans accept one form of oppression such as speciesism, we enable, empower, and mobilize all forms of structural violence and inequality (Gaard 1993; Plumwood 1993; Emel 1995; Elder et al. 1998; Kim 2015; Tallbear 2015).

This sentiment ripples throughout the fields of critical race, gender, animal, indigenous and feminist studies (Gaard 1993; Plumwood 1993; Emel 1995; Elder et al. 1998; Kim 2015; Tallbear 2015). In her article, *Are you man enough, big and bad enough? Ecofeminism and wolf eradication in the USA*, Emel (1995) relates the simultaneous genocides of grey wolves, American bison (*Bison bison*) and Indigenous peoples, writing *“The license to hate and aggress guaranteed by both racism and speciesism is written in one paranoid and sadistic hand”* (page 731). Following this understanding, we argue that violence towards coyote indicates a society operating on historical, colonialist and speciesist notions of who and what deserves to be included within the framework of welfare. A society that allows coyote persecution has further validated any already existing systems of oppression and opened the door for more.

A MORE COMPASSIONATE FUTURE

In this essay, we parallel the systemically poor welfare of coyotes to marginalization and persecution of human groups. This is our lens into a larger concept of oppression and violence based on other social constructs, such as, gender, race, or species, among others. We illustrate some systemic drivers of violence and oppression as they relate to species. Of course, we understand that realities and experiences of all marginalized groups, human or non-human, are completely unique and it is ultimately an insufficient metaphor (Kim 2015). However, it is our belief that by extending the drivers of marginalization of humans (in particular colonial structures, racism, notions of “the other”, etc.) to coyotes, we might enhance societal understanding of speciesism and how it often relates to other systems of oppression (Kim 2015).

We believe that wildlife conservation will not succeed without taking into account both human and non-human animal wellbeing, and acknowledging the underpinning systems of oppression. Stressors, such as food scarcity, land rights, availability of education, and development, etc., increase tensions within human communities and increase perception of human-wildlife conflict (Bjerke, et al. 2000; Skogen and Krange 2003; Pratt et al. 2004; Jacobs et al. 2012; Anand and Radhakrishna 2017; Noga et al. 2018). Kim (2015) aptly noted that oppression of marginalized human and animal groups can often go hand and hand. Thus, future conservation efforts should consider the human communities’ needs, wants, and desires, along with those of the local species, to increase the long-term success of the project and create a more equitable, respectful relationship between the researcher and relevant community (Wakefield 2007; Finney 2014; Tallbear 2014).

To successfully move forward, we must first reckon with our past. Still driving many management models, we must identify and renounce colonial values that some conservation programs have been built upon. For instance, a growing body of scientists have already argued that the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation—a guiding set of principles for Canadian and American wildlife management—needs to be renounced. Suggesting that hunting is a key component of conservation, this model built with the sporting and capital interests of white, male hunters reinforces sexism, speciesism and colonialism by prioritizing the values and desires of a very privileged group (Nelson 2011; Eichler and Baumeister 2018). Casting the foundational models we use to conserve species under the microscope of marginalization,

Oppression and violence, we hope to illuminate the underlying values and make a space for more inclusive and compassionate approaches. It is time for new research and conservation models that do not prioritize colonialist values (Schell et al. 2020).

Moreover, we suggest it is critical to bring all these ideas and changes back to the species level through education and reimagining of our societies. Perhaps when we attempt to more intimately understand coyotes, their complex social structures, feeding habits, and more, we can imagine a more inclusive place for them within our societies. Creating new social constructs, built on a more educated and nuanced lexicon that do not condemn coyotes as a pest or threat, but rather recognizes their complete belonging within our North American landscape, is a critical step towards understanding, and celebrating our inter-species coexistence. Engendering compassion for coyotes will require a new social contract that draws non-human species closer to us, while also appreciating their differences (Elder et al. 1998).

Reimagining a place for coyotes will require deconstructing speciesism. This will be challenging as systems of oppression are not easily dismantled. For instance, killing coyotes has been constructed as a right and a cultural tradition, financially and perhaps socially benefitting certain privileged societal groups. More than colonialist, the desire to kill coyotes and grey wolves, rather than coexist, has been linked to constructs of “masculinity” as well (Emel 1995; Krange and Skogen 2011; Hermann et al. 2013); critiquing coyote persecution will likely be met with cultural resistance (Skogen and Krange 2003). Looking to indigenous, feminist, race and other critical studies, we know that it may take centuries to realize any change. Yet, in allowing speciesist violence to continue, we endanger the security of all socially marginalized groups, wildlife and human alike.

In closing, we believe coyotes offer us hope. While the Anthropocene is characterized by expanding human footprints on planet earth and the rapid loss of species (Lorimer 2015), coyotes and their indomitable presence offer us an opportunity to learn from our mistakes. Despite our explicit campaigns to exterminate the species, they have adapted, learning to coexist with us, in even the most manipulated of landscapes (Mowry and Wilson 2015; Flores 2016). In this skill for adaptation and survival, coyotes continue to offer citizens, scientists, managers and conservationist the opportunity to evolve and mature.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alexandra Boesel is a graduate student at the University of Calgary studying under Dr. Shelley Alexander in the Canid Conservation Lab. Her research seeks to understand



the social structures underlying anti-coyote attitudes and behaviours in the Foothills of Alberta. She is a teaching assistant in animal geography courses and also interns with WildAid, a non-profit attempting to end global wildlife trade. Borrowing

from feminism, decolonizing and antiracism literature, Alexandra seeks to deconstruct violence towards coyotes. She graduated from Wesleyan University in 2015 with bachelor's in biology and neuroscience. After finishing her MSc, Alexandra plans to pursue a PhD with either

multispecies ethnography or critical animal geography approaches.

Shelley M. Alexander, PhD is a Professor in the Department of Geography, University of Calgary. She has 25 years of experience studying ecology and human dimensions of wild canids, specializing in wolves and coyotes in Canada. Shelley has conducted conservation research internationally and is an expert in geospatial analysis (GIS, Satellite imagery, and statistics) for conservation. As the Founder of the Canid Conservation Science Lab (www.ucalgary.ca/canid-lab), she employs and promotes the principles of Compassionate Conservation, and is an advocate for animal welfare in science. She also teaches Animal Geography, Biogeography, and Philosophy of Science.



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