***Manifest Destiny Idealism in the Science and Writings of John James Audubon***

Jake Kosek’s *Understories* references late 19th century proto-environmentalist and conservationist John Muir. He worked within a society who, according to Kosek depicts “notions of whiteness and superiority relied deeply on formations of nature,” which included manifest destiny. The natural flow of events of manifest destiny included the displacement of and attempts of genocide upon indigenous populations. Other demonstrations of manifest destiny also included displacement and eradication of (non-human) animals that obfuscated Anglo concepts of nature and benefited indigenous ways of being. Moreover, these concepts of manifest destiny were inseparable from one another when naturalists thought about who belonged in nature. For example, when John Muir travelled to California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains, he spoke ill of not only indigenous populations, but also Chinese immigrant workers, Hispano herders, and their sheep because he believed they obstructed nature’s purity by their mere presence.

At first, Muir’s dissatisfaction may seem unrelated, if not contradictory to manifest destiny, as husbandry played a significant role of Anglo-squatters migrating to the West and displacing previously inhabited populations of humans and non-human creatures.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, when one looks at what Muir is specifically against, his concept of nature still includes the desire to displace non-Anglo populations as well as unwanted (non-human) animals. When looking closer at *American Progress*, one can see a similar distinction. The Amerindians are fleeing in the darkness of “inevitable progress”, along with animals such as wolves (or their tame canids), bears, and bison. Though the targeted groups of displacement differ contextually, what is important to remember is that Muir’s concept of “nature” still invokes manifest destiny because it benefited from the displacement of indigenous populations, and his desire to create a Eurocentric ecology that mirrored the squatters which did not included unwanted people and animals.

Moreover, preceding figures held similar sentiments (including scientists), such as 19th century naturalist/painter John James Audubon. In this paper, I will argue that Audubon’s rhetoric took part in the formation of manifest destiny despite receiving praise from scholars of holding more positive views of non-whites and of animals than his contemporaries and later naturalists like Muir. Firstly, I shall focus on Audubon’s disparaging (and complimentary) remarks of animals and non-whites, starting with his travels along the Missouri River in 1843. Next, I will analyze how in earlier his life while in Kentucky he held similar sentiments with his interactions with slaves and wolves. Lastly, I shall discuss the science of the day that complimented the displacement of non-whites included viewing them as inferior with the craniology of non-whites (and anatomy of wolves) with Audubon’s travels to Texas and along the Missouri River. From here, I shall conclude that Audubon’s writings and his scientific endeavors reflected manifest destiny tenets which later generations incorporated.

***Audubon and the Native-Wolf Parallels:***

Audubon, like Muir, experienced nature indifferent to the suffering to indigenous populations dating back to his excursions in Florida in the 1830s. Audubon wanted to pursue an excursion in Florida during the war against the Seminoles, but was disappointed because of ships were being used for the conflict and not for scientific investigation: “We are completely disappointed at not having a Cutter here –The Florida War has caused all of the Vessels of the denomination to be sent there.” This indifference to the plight of the Seminoles continued when the war ended: “Two Chiefs have sued for Peace, and brought in some Indians. –Gl. Jesup has taken about 100 prisoners, and a truce was to continue until the 18th Instant, when it hoped that all the Indians will comes to terms and leave the Country. If so the Cutters will return to their different Stations, and we will have no dif[f]iculty in getting one to convey us as far as we may wish to proceed.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In a March 3letter of the same year, he exclaimed the potential of the Florida War’s end when his expedition spotted a bird breeding (possibly a Brown ibis) in that section of Florida.[[3]](#footnote-3) Audubon’s prioritizing of avian species over his fellow humans functioned in a way that obscured the relationship that the Seminole had made with the land and interacted with its ecology, and the costs of war has upon ecologies in general.

Audubon’s sentiments towards native people, as well as non-human animals, became more abrasively bigoted by the time he travelled along the Missouri in 1843. During these travels, Audubon also referred to the Indians’ persons and living quarters as dirty, as Muir did decades later. Any positive commentary from Audubon eventually took a turn for the worst. One example was when on May 27 four male Sioux “poor beggars” fired salutes as the Audubon expedition made landfall on their way to Fort George. Upon initially meeting them, they were “comparatively good-looking” for beggars, according to Audubon. His positive sentiments towards them dissipated entirely by the morning, though, as he “was glad enough to be rid of those beggars by trade”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Audubon continued with the harsh commentary when describing the Mandan people. When he shook hands with them, he felt a “clamminess that rendered the ceremony repulsive”, noting their mud-covered legs and naked feet and that their captain stated that they were the ne plus ultra thieves. Upon heading to the Mandan medicine lodge he spotted an “Indian wrapped in a dirty blanket” and his “filthy head” poked out, and later spoke ill of the writers that spoke of “velvety prairies” and “enchanted castles (of mud)” in Indian country. Audubon slightly complimented the Riccaree people as being redder, lank, tall, and alert, but to him still looked “poor and dirty”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

These comments parallel with Audubon’s opinion of the wolves that Audubon’s expedition hunted, as he was in the process of collecting specimens for a painting collection of mammalian quadrupeds of the West. Like the natives, he frequently referred to them as rascals. One reference begins with an incident on June 8 in which expedition mate Mr. Bell shot a bird and a wolf quickly appeared at the body. For Audubon, when one shoots an animal and hides, within a half-hour, ten to thirty of those “hungry rascals” would appear at the carcass, which would be “fine fun” shooting. Another instance in which he designated one as such was on June 3 when a Mr. Bell from his expedition spotted “the wily rascal” on a drift-wood, and as the wolf ran away and hid, Bell shot it dead. After it was brought ashore and dipped in the river to clean it, Audubon exclaimed joy in obtaining his first specimen, but lamented that the wolf was “rather poor”.

On June 18, Audubon grew angry at Bell for “suffering the Gray Wolf” to be thrown into the river after a more recent wolf kill. It was not because of the wolf’s suffering, but as a specimen to be examined: “I spoke to him on the subject of never losing a specimen till we were quite sure that it would not be needed”. He trusted Bell that his heeding would last “for all time”. However, there were a few other instances in which the Audubon expedition threw “away” wolves’ bodies or found the examinations inadequate because of their state of being either “old”, “poor”, or “useless”.

Wolves, among other creatures, were targets of particular for white explorers and squatters from the beginning of U.S. expansionism out West. Although Lewis and Clark’s (in)famous Corps of Discovery hunted more bears than wolves, their warnings on wolves (among other creatures) “set the bar” for thousands of travelers and squatters for American expansionism, according to historian Frank Van Nuys. Early squatters wrote about wolves peering outside of their living quarters and some snatching up some of their sheep. Van Nuys stated once they arrived in the Great Plains and the Far West, “they replicated the patterns of conflict that had eradicated wolves and other predatory mammals in Europe and the East.” When wolves would feast on the carcasses of the massive buffalo hunts, ranchers exploited these opportunities to plant strychnine into the meat, which killed the wolves upon their feeding and stimulated the wolf pelt trade, which was bolstered by “global market forces” and “industrialization.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Though Audubon did not arrive to the Great Plains for settlement, earlier writings from him mirror this domination of wolves by white men, and juxtaposes the sub-human status on non-whites. In this case, it was wolves and black slaves in Kentucky, respectively.

***Wolves, Blacks, Subjects of Inquiry and Unsatisfactory Beings***

In Audubon’s 1831 *Ornithological Biography*, there was a section titled “Pitting of Wolves”. He speaks of the “strength, agility, and cunning” of the wolf, but only as a threat to husbandmen. Though Audubon states of few attacks having occurred among them by men, he goes on to mention two incidents in Kentucky where a pack wolves launched a surprise attack “two young Negroes” who would generally visit their slave “sweethearts” on a distant plantation, giving only by a “long and frightful howl” as evidence of their nearby presence. The hungry wolves lunged after them both as the Negroes fought back until one stopped moving, leaving the other to spring towards a tree branch for safety. The next morning, one of the young Negroes lie dead next to three dead wolves around, and “Scipio” the survivor departed from the tree, grabbed the axes used to presumably kill the wolves (as Audubon never specifically states that they used them), and went home to tell the tale.[[7]](#footnote-7) This not only depicts the slaves as largely helpless, but as their lives needing protection by slave-owning whites to prevent falling victim to the dangers of nature outside of their surveillance.

The other story of a wolf attack describes the white man as the victor, and unlike the first story, Audubon as a firsthand spectator. While spending the night at a farmer’s house along a route, the host offered him an opportunity for a sporting hunt at a wolf’s-pit to avenge the wolves that nearly wiped out his sheep population, and Audubon accepted. The next morning, he accompanied the farmer along with his dogs to hunt the wolves that caught the bait. As the farmer planned to hamstring the captured wolves, Audubon requested to be a mere onlooker due to his inexperience with wolf hunting. The first two were rounded by nooses and let loose to be slaughtered by the farmer’s dogs, but the last wolf (a female) had put up a fight before the farmer shot her through the heart.[[8]](#footnote-8) Though inexperienced with wolf hunting at this time, by the time that he set off for the Missouri, he and his expedition were well prepared, as they needed specimens from which to base their drawings for the *Viviparous Quadrupeds* collection. However, Audubon showed little concern of the species outside of this, and frequently berated them with a scornful bias. Therefore, the wolves joined the natives as populations to be prejudicially insulted by Audubon.

Furthermore, this subjugation of black people frequently mirrored the sciences in which non-whites were the subjects of interest, which included craniology (and sub-related pseudo-sciences such as phrenology). Contemporary figures such as Samuel George Morton portrayed alleged differences between the skulls of whites and non-whites (e.g. Natives and Africans) which would reveal the capabilities, or lack thereof, of non-whites to achieve a civilized self. Therefore, non-whites were paralleled with wolves as scientific subjects due to their inferiority to (patriarchal, colonial) whiteness.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Audubon took part in skull collecting in his scientific expeditions. While in Texas in 1836, Audubon had attempted to collect the skulls of Mexican prisoners, and managed obtained a few from battlefields where unburied Mexican soldiers’ bodies remained. He also obtained skulls from indigenous sites along the Missouri river expedition as well, and similarly desecrated non-white bodies. For example, Audubon’s crew went to the three-year-old grave of an Indian chief named White Cow. The crew pulled down the coffin from the tree and removed all of the materials covering his body (buffalo skin, robe, and U.S. flag). White Cow’s remains were left excluding his head. The crew attempted to place the coffin back in the tree but it fell down, and they intended to return the next day to cover the remains in dirt. If the crew did return to “properly” bury White Cow, Audubon did not care enough to write about it in his journal. Audubon’s positive statements about White Cow only mattered when reflected praising whites and degrading (his fellow) natives: “He was a good friend to the white and knew how to procure many Buffalo robes for them…and never failed to harangue his people on all occasions.”

If the natives were half-white, or the dogs half-wolf, his negative remarks would continue based on attributes of their “uncivilized” half, and this had earlier precursors as well.[[10]](#footnote-10) He carried these same sentiments upon the Indian women and “half-breeds” he saw on May 28. Upon reaching a camp near Fort George, he spotted “a greater number of squaws and half-breed children” than anticipated. He later spoke of the clerk and agent having “a wife”, (quotations his own), “a spurious population soon exhibits itself around the wigwams”.

This sighting is especially important, because it is where he also griped about mixed breeds between dogs and wolves. Earlier in that day, he spotted Indian dogs at the fort, which so closely resemble feral wolves, he was certain that he would “assuredly kill”, one as a wolf. Not long before he saw the “squaws” and half-breeds, he saw two young live wolves. Though they looked well, he saw that their nature was “pretty apparently that of the parents.” He then saw “semi-wolf Dogs whose howling “distress[ed] his ear.” Any mix of a dog with wolf was as unappealing as the mixes between Indians and whites.

The only notable exception to this was Mrs. Culbertson, a native woman married to one of Audubon’s colleagues named Mr. Culbertson. When on the hunt for a wolf, Audubon complimented her and her maid for horse-riding “astride like men”, saying that any European lady or modern belles who boast their equestrian skills seeing the ability of this “Indian princess” would be amazed, in awe of her black hair, “floating like a banner behind her”. They eventually caught up to the wolf, with Mr. Culbertson killing it. However, he continued to speak of Mrs. Culbertson highly, possessing “strength and grace in a marked degree.” In addition, while she praised Audubon’s crewmember Squires for being as good as any rider in the country, Mrs. Culbertson, the former looking “like a being from the infernal regions, painted Audubon’s compatriots Squires and Owen in an “awful manner””. Again, the positive elements of horse-riding “like a man,” complimenting whites, being married to a good (white) friend, and of course, wolf-hunting, accompany these series of platitudes that cannot be disassociated from Audubon’s character. Moreover, her horse-riding did not reflect her native upbringing (depicted in paintings such as the one in Gast’s *American Progress*), but had to reflect European women, revealing Audubon’s Eurocentric bias.

These sentiments of wolf-eradication foreshadowed what was to occur at conservation sites such as Yosemite Park, and mirrors the perception of naturalists like Muir in regards to sheep, and reflecting a larger sentiment of white supremacist perceptions of nature as articulated in Jake Kosek’s *Understories*.

***Conclusion:***

Aspects of manifest destiny articulated in paintings such as *American Progress* and Muir’s concept of nature seem to contradict one another, as Muir’s concept of nature disregards any concept of progress and civilization brought about by squatters arriving from East of the Mississippi. However, upon a deeper analysis, these sentiments both complement each other in that Muir’s concept of nature is supposed to be *progress* upon what was the ecology of the Sierra Nevada (among other places) prior to the arrival of Anglo populations (and the acquisition of the land from Mexico by the United States). This “progress” also included the displacement of humans and non-human animals not desired by the Anglo-population, which was reflected in the science of the day. Audubon, whose career operated a generation prior to Muir and before manifest destiny became a commonplace phrase, mirrors the precepts of the concept in his depiction of non-whites and wolves, as well as the manner in which he scientifically observed and objectified them as sub-human specimens by which to be analyzed by the “superior” White supremacist culture.

1. One notable example representing manifest destiny as a concept is John Gast’s 1872 *American Progress*. This shows Columbia as a symbolic representation of the United States, carrying “civilization” carrying aspects of what is perceived to be civilized (e.g. railroads, subsistence farming, roads, fences, western-style housing, etc.) on a hitherto unchartered territory by Anglo-culture, which would include aspects of farming. The Anglos accompanying Columbia bring livestock and other domesticated animals along with them, which would likely not be permitted in Muir’s “unscathed” regions such as the Sierra Nevada Mountains. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John James Audubon; Howard Corning*, Letters of John James Audubon , Vol. I-II* (Boston: Kraus Reprint, 1969), 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Audubon; Corning, *Letters of John James Audubon , Vol. I-II*, 149-150 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Audubon, “Missouri River Journals,” 599-600 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Upon first arriving to the Mandan village nearby, he lambasts fellow painter (and rival) George Caitlin for his depiction of the Mandan mud huts looking far from the poetic appearance in his paintings and portraying their layout and uniform and similar when they were anything but. Soon after Audubon’s crew landed on shore, they locked away all of their items, fastened their doors shut, and hid their axes and poles. This was because of Mandans had a reputation of thievery, including a “squaw” who refused to give up the captain of the crew’s leather belt. It is also important to note that attempts to portray native people in more “positive” manners were happening simultaneously by contemporaries such as painter George Caitlin. Part of Audubon’s logs contained criticisms of the perceived falsehoods of Caitlin’s adoration of the indigenous people he painted, in particular the Mandans. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. French Canadians, English and Americans had agreed to a Wolf Association that set three-dollar bounties on large wolves, the Mormons made a deliberate effort to “clear their Zion of predators”; between a span of four months of December 1848-March 1849 they killed 783 wolves. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Audubon, “Pitting of the Wolves,” in John James Audubon, *Writings and Drawings*, ed. by Cristoph Irmscher (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1999), 544-45 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Audubon, “Pitting of the Wolves,” 545-47 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is important to note that Audubon owned slaves while he lived in Kentucky, and slaves frequently were referred to while on excursions with friends who also owned slaves, though they were referred to as “servants” in his journals. His father also owned slaves while Haiti was still under French control (Audubon was born in Les Cayes, Saint Domingue), so this subjugation of blacks would have not been unfamiliar to his upbringing, even if he were only six years old when his father sent him and his sibling to France due to the revolution in Saint Domingue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Over two decades earlier, he spoke of the women of color that he had seen at a Sunday morning market in New Orleans. Although he appreciated the ringing church bells and the clanking billiard balls making for a beautiful day, he immediately scoffed at the women of color: “I saw however no handsome Woman and the Citron hue of almost all is very disgusting to one who Likes the rosy Yankee or English cheeks.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)