Response Paper #2:
Jon T. Coleman's *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* and
Richard White's *The Cultural Landscape of the Pawnee*

Jon T. Coleman begins his book *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* with what he sees as a Darntonian moment – the hamstringing and subsequent torture of wolves caught in a trap by a nineteenth century Indiana farmer. The farmer, who had covered the pit the night before with interwoven mats and venison, discovered the animals cowering in it the next morning. Despite their acquiescence, the farmer delighted in watching as his hounds attacked them. "The scene," as Coleman describes it, "was horrid."[1] The male wolf that the farmer drug from the pit was "motionless with fright… its disabled legs swinging to and fro, its jaws wide open and the gurgle in its throat alone indicating that it was alive."[2] For Coleman, the scene's violence represents an analytic opportunity. The farmer did not feel remorse about the wolves that he and his hounds had just slaughtered. It was an act of revenge for the farmer whose sheep had been ravaged that summer by a wolf pack. According to Coleman, the farmer's actions, although bizarre to modern Americans, provide us with an opportunity to understand the history of the relationship between wolves and humans in North America. To help reconstruct that relationship, Coleman explores the intersection of folklore with the experiences of the American colonists and discovers that the relationship between European settlers and wolves was one in which violence had a regenerative function, restoring order and civility to a world that had been disrupted.

According to Coleman, the colonists who arrived in the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century came from a world depopulated of wolves.[3] The animal still had a presence within their folklore, however; Anglo-Saxon kings might find their heads cradled in wolf paws,

[1] Jon T. Coleman, Vicious: Wolves and Men in America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) 1 – 2.
[2] Scott Russell Sanders, ed., Audubon Reader: The Best Writings of John James Audubon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986). Quoted in Coleman 2.
[3] Coleman 37.

and villagers buried the animal's tail beneath their roads to prevent vicious animals from entering.[4] These tales provided possible contexts for colonists to understand the world that they encountered when they landed in North America. Not all folktales, however, survive to provide meaning in new contexts. It is unlikely that the colonists drew on all the possible permutations available to them as they tried to understand the new world they were encountering.[5] The question becomes, then, which of the folktales present in Europe shaped the colonists' understanding of their relationship with wolves.

Coleman tries to pinpoint the influence of European folklore on the colonies by examining the Bibles that the colonists read and the speeches that their ministers gave for references to the animals. In these sources, he discovered an animal that threatened the souls of colonists. The town minister Edward Johnson described the wolves and bears that lurked in the desert, threatening to devour any soul that strayed from the flock.[6] Coleman argues that this imagery encouraged colonists to see "life (and death)" as though they were "prey."[7] Through their religious texts, they vicariously experienced the "raw panic" of being another animal's meal.[8] It is in this imagining and vicarious experience that Coleman sees the genesis of the violence that the farmer happily visited upon the Indiana wolves. By seeing themselves as prey, the colonists gave themselves a reason to react violently against the wolves. The mutilation and slaughter of wolves was a way to ensure the safety of humans and to establish order in what they saw as an uncivilized landscape.[9]

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[4] Coleman 40.
[5] Coleman 38.
[6] Coleman 43.
[7] Coleman 106.
[8] Coleman 106.
[9] Coleman 106.

Although Coleman's analysis of the relationship between religious imagery and the violence with which colonists killed wolves interesting, I am not sure that it completely explains the relationship between the humans and canines. Wolves were not the only things that were dismembered in early America. Native Americans could also find their heads on a pike. During King Philip's War, for example, colonists living in New England feared that members of the rebellious Wampanoag alliance would transform their towns into "landscapes of ashes."[10] The stories that circulated during the time described "Barbarous enraged Natives" burning houses, killing cattle, and mutilating dead bodies.[11] The colonists responded with acts that were just as violent. After the death of Metacom in August 1676, the colonists responded with a day of thanksgiving. They placed his head on top of a large pole so that everyone could view it. According to the historian Jill Lepore, the head was the "centerpiece" of the celebration and remained long after it was over.[12]

According to Coleman, the colonists often used animal imagery to describe Native Americans. Their attacks could be described as "ravenings" and dissident Native American tribes such as the Pequot and Algonquians were labeled "hell-hounds," "roaring lions," and "ravenous bears."[13] In Lepore's work, however, it is not the animal imagery that is most troubling for the colonists. It is their inability to bury their dead and the possibility that the bodies, rotting and desiccated, would lie forever in the open air.[14] Her analysis does not deny that the relationship between wolves and colonists in early America was at least partially determined by a prey relationship. It does, however, raise questions that complicate that

[10] Jill Lepore, The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity (New York, NY: Knopf Publishing, 1998) 72.
[11] Lepore 72.
[12] Lepore 174.
[13] Coleman 62.
[14] Lepore 81.

relationship. For the colonists, the stripping of fingers and limbs from bodies disrupted proper burial practices, raising the disturbing possibility that those bodies, naked and damaged, would be left to rot in the open.[15] The colonists saw this disruption of burial as a disruption of civilization and often lamented their inability to ensure proper care of all Christian bodies. Lepore cites source after source describing the colonists' agony at their inability to bury the bodies that had been left to rot in the open air.[16]

The threat of consumption of human bodies by wolves in folklore would have played into the colonialists' fears about the possible disruption of burial practices, and thus, civility. They often described the Native Americans tribes that attacked settlers as they stood in their doorways and then left the bodies, skinned and bloodied, to rot as wolves. This is not to say that the settlers' identification with the animals that wolves hunted did not shape their relationship with the animal. The colonists would have seen the wolves' predations on their livestock and the disruption of burial practices as a threat to the social order, and it is difficult to determine which was more important to determining the tenor of the relationship between wolves and colonists. Whatever the ultimate cause of the colonists' violence towards wolves, however, Lepore and Coleman both see its role as a redemptive one. Placing Native American and wolf heads on pikes was a way to proclaim the colonists' superiority over men and beasts and to re-establish order.[17] Coleman sees the skulls dotting the landscape of colonial America as representing "the colonists' yearning for power, domination, and control" – as symbols of "English ascendancy."[18]

Although both Lepore and Coleman agree on the symbolic value that colonists placed on the Native American and animal skulls, Coleman extends his analysis by arguing that the

[15] Lepore 81.
[16] Lepore 81.
[17] Coleman 62.
[18] Coleman 63.

meaning of the skulls could never completely determined. The colonists' determination that skulls were symbols of their domination and power was challenged by the very different native interpretation of their value. For Coleman, the part of the reason for the miscommunication between the two groups lies in biology. Humans, he argues, are the only animals that have developed "a communication system that can make members of the same species incomprehensible to each other."[19] Animal communication, although lacking the subtlety of human communication, is remarkably effective. Wolves, for example, use a variety of symbols and actions to make their intent and presence known to each other. By marking their territory with scat, vocalizing their presence through howls, and growling, wolves communicate their presence to other members of their species and identify spatial boundaries.[20]

When colonists started arriving in North America in the sixteenth century, they discovered that it was difficult to communicate with the native tribes that lived near them. To help them communicate with each other, they often appropriated the communication systems of animals. When the Algonquians were able to chase the French onto their ship, for example, they marked their dominance of the occasion by digging the body of one of the men they had killed, tearing down the cross that adorned his grave, and casting sand between their legs, all the while, "yelping like wolves."[21] These symbols, however, could be misinterpreted, and for Coleman, they symbolize humanity's bewilderment in the face of another language rather than an innate ability to overcome linguistic difficulties. The people of North America, he argues, only resorted to animal sounds in times of discord. When Giovanni de Verrazano first invited Native

[19] Coleman 21.
[20] Coleman 19 – 23, 35 – 36, 64.
[21] Neal Salisbury, Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982) Quoted in Coleman 31.

Americans onto his ships, the overwhelming mood was one of laughter. It was only when humans become frightened, when they felt uncertain, that they began to "bark."[22]

The ability of colonists to communicate with the Native American tribes that surrounded them improved but the groups often misinterpreted each other's cultural symbols. For many Native American tribes, the ritual killing of wolves was an act of justice, but it was an act of justice that was very different from the one envisioned by the colonists.[23] For some tribes such as the Algonquians, the deer they trapped had offered themselves as food for the community. When wolves ate the deer the tribe had trapped, they stole the deer's gift. Killing the wolves was an act in which the wolves returned the gift that they had taken. It was an act of justice, but a "reciprocal one."[24] The Algonquians traded the skulls and pelts of the creature as "symbols of partnership, alliance, and equality."[25] The colonists were also interested in the symbolic value that a wolf head could have and often included demands for wolf heads as part of the treaties that they negotiated with individual Native American tribes. In 1671, for example, the Plymouth Colony signed a treaty with the Wampanoag Metacomet, in which the defeated sachem would provide the colony with five wolf heads a year in recognition of his fealty.[26] According to Coleman, the exchange in heads had a very different meaning for the colonists than it did for Native American tribes.

While many Native American tribes likely saw their tribute as a way to restore balance to their relationship with the English colonists, the colonists saw it as proof as the tribes' submission and compliance. Roger Williams, for example, believed that the Pequot would

[22] Coleman 30 – 31.
[23] Coleman 49.
[24] Coleman 49.
[25] Coleman 53.
[26] Coleman 63.

submit to being dispersed throughout the colonies.[27] The result of the misunderstanding between the Native Americans and the colonists was often violence. Coleman sees the contested meaning as the wolf heads exchanged between Metacomet and the Plymouth colony as quickening war between the two. Metacomet, who may have viewed the heads as restoring lost balance rather than a symbol of his submission, might have also viewed the continued attempts of colonists to insist on his subservience as a "broken promise."[28] For Coleman, much of the discord between colonists and Native American tribes lies in their inability to communicate effectively with one another. Although human systems of communication allow for subtlety, they also create the possibility that members of one group will misread another's symbols. Animals, using scat and urine to communicate, can easily recognize the signs of submission and dominance that their species has devised. When humans misread the symbols of other members of their species, violence can result.

Although Coleman's arguments about communication and the genesis of violence towards wolves are interesting, the ultimate value of his work lies in the questions he raises about the role of non-human actors in history. In Coleman's history, animals are no longer bystanders to history; they participate in its creation. Humans appropriated animal forms of communication, yipping and yapping when their own language system failed.[29] They traded in wolf skins and heads to restore power relationship between themselves and to establish their dominance over other human groups.[30] And, they incorporated wolves into their folklore, using wolf hunts and violence to establish their dominance over what at times seemed like unyielding

[27] Coleman 64.
[28] Coleman 64.
[29] Coleman 31.
[30] Coleman 64.

environment.[31] His emphasis on the roles that wolves have played in early American history "splinters" human history, showing that although they inhabited a world familiar to historians, they also existed in a context in which the events that historians typically investigate – revolutions, conflict over social meaning, and identity – have "little meaning."[32]

Although largely convincing, Coleman's investigation of the role that wolf imagery played in the colonists' system of meaning could be problematic at times. Although Coleman argues that culture and biology offer moments of possibility and change, the space that those moments occupy in his history is very small. One of the moments that he explores is the migration of Mormon settlers across the Great Plains during the nineteenth century. Their theology, he argues, offered an alternative vision of the relationship between humans and the animals he encountered. Joseph Smith had exalted his followers to "become harmless before brute creation."[33] When a large wolf appeared near the Platte River during a prayer service, the wolf was allowed to lope away unharmed.[34] According to Coleman, the urging of Joseph Smith to his followers that they should become peaceful participations in the animal kingdom offered a moment of opportunity in which a new relationship between wolves and humans could have been created. The Mormons, however, chose cultural stasis rather than cultural change.[35]

Coleman's vision of cultural stasis, however, seems an artificial one. In his article "The Cultural Landscape of the Pawnee," Richard White argues that the introduction of horses into the Pawnee society caused the Great Plains Native Americans to adapt their lifestyle to accommodate the new animal.[36] Initially a replacement of the dog as a "burden bearer," the

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[31] Coleman 62.
[32] Coleman 14.
[33] Coleman 148.
[34] Coleman 149.
[35] Coleman 170.
[36] Richard White, "The Cultural Landscape of the Pawnees," Great Plains Quarterly, 2 (Winter 1982), p. 31 – 40.

horse transformed the way that the tribe hunted buffalo, changing what had been a communal experience into a more personal one.[37] The best horsemen were rewarded with prestige and the most meat, White argues, while families that could not afford a large number of horses were forced to play more "peripheral" roles in the hunt.[38] Although the Pawnee's culture had always been nomadic, they were forced to modify their migrations to fit the grazing patterns of the large herds that they maintained. The tribe, for example, changed their seasonal hunts to allow them to harvest hay and cultivate the grasslands they inhabited through controlled burning. [39]

Although White's article focuses on Native American society and an animal that is quite different than the wolf, his article raises questions about the cultural stasis that Coleman envisions for white Americans as they migrated from their original colonies in the Eastern woodlands and coasts to the Western half of the continent. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that white colonial society was not at least partially transformed by its experiences in an alien environment. How might the colonists have adapted the folklore they brought from their European villages to understand the animals and environments they encountered for the first time in North America? How might they have changed their livestock's grazing patterns and their idea of land ownership in response to environmental pressures? How might colonial society have changed as the colonists were forced to find new supplies? Did the interaction between Native Americans and colonists alter the culture of the English colonies? Questions about how the colonists might have adapted as they were faced with new food supplies and with a different environment, however, cannot be answered by turning to Coleman's text. Instead of imagining the colonial experience as one of adaption and change, he sees it as one in which the colonists

[37] White 35.
[38] White 35.
[39] White 37.

trapped themselves in a battle for calories by refusing to recognize the incompatibility of their culture with their new environment.

Change itself has an uneasy position within Coleman's work. Although he argues that white settlers preferred cultural stasis and viewed cultural change as a kind of hell, it does occur in his book.[40] According to Coleman, increasing urbanization in the United States in the early twentieth fundamentally changed the relationship between Americans and the environment. "A host of intermediaries," he writes,

> inserted themselves into a beast's journey from field to plate. Butchers, veterinarians, stockyard workers, steroid salesman, and maitre d's lengthened a process that once spanned the ax handle that Farmer Jones swung to turn Bossy into dinner. Urban Americans lost the tactile experience of raising food. They neither heard the squeals, nor smelled the offal, nor saw the blood, nor tasted the rage when predators swallowed a cherished investment.[41]

In Coleman's work, increasing industrialization allowed humans to re-shape their vision of wolves and cast them, not as criminals or thieves, but as an honored relics from a forgotten past. As humans became disconnected from livestock, they no longer competed with wolves for resources. The violence that they had used to re-order the world could be channeled in other directions. As a whole, this argument is convincing. I wonder, however, whether the change was as complete as Coleman portrays it.

Although many people became disconnected from agriculture in the early twentieth century, not all people did. In rural areas, many people retained their connection to livestock, guarding sheep and calves against predation by coyotes and mountain lions. It is still possible to

[40] Coleman 173.
[41] Coleman 203.

drive through states like Idaho and Wyoming and see the corpses of coyotes hung on fence posts. Most of the ranchers in the West, as well as many state governors, opposed wolf reintroduction when it was proposed in the 1990s. Idaho Governor Butch Otter, for example, expressed his desire that all but one hundred of the wolves in Idaho be destroyed and said that he was prepared to bid for one of the permits to kill the wolves himself.[42]

Although the hunts lacked the communal aspect of the ones that Coleman describes as taking place in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, they retained much of the vitriol. When the Wyoming legislature debated wolves' introduction in 2004, they recalled the predations that wolves had made on their grandfathers' farms and worried that the laws, which prevented farmers from using smoke to suffocate wolf pups in their dens, would provide incomplete protection for their livestock.[43] The language used by ranchers and government representatives to discuss the reintroduction of the animals suggests that the change in the relationship between men and wolves, which Coleman sees as radical and far-reaching, might not be so complete after all. Coleman represents the torture and slaughter of wolves as something incomprehensible, as something so alien to our experiences that it reminds of the differentness of the past while at the same time providing us with a starting point from which we can reconstruct past societies and their systems of meaning. I wonder, however, if the Wyoming and Idaho farmers who argued against legislation for the reintroduction of wolves and then for the right to kill the animals after the law was passed would have found the actions of the colonists and white settlers so alien.

The changes in the relationship between wolves and men, then, in North America were at once less drastic and more dynamic than Coleman suggests. It seems doubtful that the

[42] Gary Ferguson. 2008. "The Big Bad Wolf: In the Rockies, Man's Hatred and Fear of the Species is on Display Again," Los Angeles Times, April 30, sec. A.
[43] Katharine Mieszkowski, "The Wolf in All of Us," Salon, June 10, 2004 <http://dir.salon.com/story/tech/feature/2004/06/10/wolf/index1.html> Downloaded: October 27, 2008.

relationship between wolves and men in early America was as static as Coleman imagines it. White's article, although written about a different animal and human community, suggests that the relationship between a group's culture and the environment they inhabited was somewhat fluid. Both changed in relationship to each other. In combination with the continuity between current views towards wolves and those held in the past, this suggests that changes in the white settler's views of wolves may have been more subtle and gradual than Coleman as suggested.

Coleman's work, however, does open up new possibilities for the writing of history. Although the ritual slaughter of wolves might not be the Darntonian moment of dissonance that Coleman has suggested, it does remind us that humans have animals as their co-inhabitants in history. Wolves existed alongside the humans in periods that historians would recognize. They found the environment in which they lived altered by the livestock and practices of European settlers. They also served as symbolic currency between Native American tribes and English colonists and disturbed the graves of Mormons migrating across the country. Coleman's work reminds us that investigating the role that non-human creatures have played in our past will provide us with a fuller version of our own history. His work is imperfect. It imagines a relationship between wolves and humans that is too confined and strictured to capture the complexity of interactions between European settlers and their environment. Despite its imperfections, however, the book is a useful one. It reminds us that animals are a part of our history, and that it is only by exploring our relationships with them that we can gain a full understanding of it.