

Wild Relics in an Urban Landscape: A LOOK AT RACCOON REPRESENTATIONS IN NEWSPAPER MEDIA

by Erin Luther

As global urbanization gains momentum, human experience is increasingly restricted to dense urban environments; a new urban human looks out through the window, rejecting and inviting the "wild" in complex ways. This paper analyzes a sampling of newspaper articles that probe the dimensions of the urban wild by following the media intersection between humans and a commonly encountered wild animal, the raccoon. This intersection is typical of many urban human-wildlife interactions in the sense that it is characterized by a fierce ambivalence (Griffiths, Poulter, & Sibley, 2000). The human-raccoon relationship, however, captures this ambivalence in a way not seen with other urban wildlife. Conflicted feelings about raccoons challenge the psychic boundaries of both human and animal domesticity in an urban context.

Battling the backyard companion

Anecdotal stories of pet raccoons abound in popular literature. Two American presidents kept pet raccoons in the White House (Holmgren, p. 76). The death of Bandit, Deborah Klitsch's obese pet raccoon, made international headlines in 2004: his owner waxed nostalgic about her "best friend," recounting stories of the immense raccoon feasting on birthday cakes and accompanying his caregiver on fast food forays. Klitsch said her pet "thought he was a dog" ("Best Friend," p. A40). The comparison between raccoons and dogs is not a new one; throughout the history of their association with humans, raccoons have flirted with a dog-like domesticity. The ready comparison between raccoons and dogs raises the question: what level of "wildness" do raccoons still occupy in the consciousness of urban dwellers?

Cultural geographer Jennifer Wolch points out that urban attitudes toward wild animals fall into two broad perceptions: they are, she says, either "pests," agents in the urban environment who exact social or economic costs, or they are objectified "pets," who provide companionship, aesthetic amenity to property owners, and recreational opportunities (Wolch, 1998, p. 128). My search of newspaper databases for raccoon articles suggests that public attitudes toward raccoons do not fit into this simple dichotomy. Although raccoons are consistently described as pests, they also provide the aesthetic and social pleasure. Interestingly, these contrasting traits are nearly always expressed in the same breath. Raccoons can be simultaneously "pesky" and "sweet" (Bosley, 2003, p. B02). One article calls them "interesting" and "wretched", and admits

to a "grudging admiration in the 'horror' stories about raccoons" (Diebel, 2005, A8). Though raccoons are praised most often for their intelligence and dexterity, this admiration is typically framed within the context of a disadvantage to humans (Diebel, 2005; Jackson 2005; Richler 2005; Cowan 2005; Bosely 2003). The articles allude to a human helplessness to raccoon's aesthetic appeal: the representations are rife with such conflicted statements as "they're cute, cuddly and they can kill" ("Killer Raccoons," 1994, p. D6), or one writer's contention that she "could go mad...with an insane, unnatural hatred for these adorable urban vermin" (Lypchuk, 2000, p. 8).

The articles surveyed not only echo a common list of raccoon traits, many of them employ the same tone, what might be called a "good-ole-boys-ahunting" vernacular. Two op-ed pieces referenced here epitomize this trend: Greg McGregor's "Raccoon Wars" (2005) and Joe Fiorito's "Raccoons Used to be Neat Hats." (2004). McGregor describes how a raccoon "waged a war" against his family that began with a battle over the garbage and culminated in the raccoon's "charge" at his curious toddler. The raccoon is named "Crystal Meth" for its "wild-eyed aggression." What ensues is a battle of wits, as the author repeatedly attempts to foil the raccoon's "savaging" of his property. He compares his initial kindnesses to "Grizzly Adams" and marvels at the new "coon 'tude."

McGregor makes frequent use of images of graphic violence to achieve what he believes is a comic effect.

He wonders, for example, about what the impact might be on his children to

witness him "bludgeon the raccoons to death with a kayak paddle" (McGregor, 2005, p. C11). Even when aggressive and self-aggrandizing, the tone remains colloquial. Fiorito (2004) makes explicit use of an urban-rural dichotomy. He opens with his experience of visiting what he deems a more "natural" setting, noting that raccoons are city, not country, animals and that they are "not afraid of you and me." He narrates his own experience with raccoons in a language laced with cryptic violence: describing the damage raccoons did to his property and his response to this damage, Fiorito comments that "the coons and I played

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this game for a couple of days until I outsmarted them. Never mind how." He continues in this vein, going on to reminisce about the coonskin caps of his youth, and then proceeds to tell the story of his "country" friend, who trapped, killed, and consumed with libidinous gusto a raccoon that invaded the chicken coop and left his rooster "in a bloody heap." Fiorito notes that this is "what men do in the country." He implicitly contrasts the rugged country life, of which he approves, with the lost masculinity of traditional urban living. He alludes to this deeper underlying disconnect between humans and nature when he describes a raccoon struck with his car as "a kind of sadness in the darkness," and then "smooth driving again" (p. BO2).

Like the confusion over whether raccoons are pests or pets, the playfully aggressive tone in these articles draws upon a deep status ambiguity. The writers are attracted to the raccoons as though they were domestic, yet

threatened by them as though they were wild. The comedic force in the "good-ole-boys-ahunting" pieces lies in the implication that wild animals in an urban environment cannot represent a real threat to humans, no matter how aggressively they are pursued—the hunt-like strategies of the protagonists are

misplaced relics, mere shadows of an evolutionary heritage that has become useless in modern living. Imagine, for a moment, the same type of "war" played out between an urbanite and a different species of urban mammal. It seems unlikely that a hunting fantasy with a more archetypically wild animal, such as an urban coyote, would prove this funny, even though raccoons and coyotes share both the raccoon's trickster folklore and a phenotypic association with dogs. Nor would the aggressive "tude" of a less threatening urban animal, such as a rabbit, carry the story line. In these representations, the raccoons are the real relic; intersections with human domesticity have turned a once wild creature into a thinly animalized other that has lost its ontological way.

Through the eyes of the masked marvel

J. Desmond notes that the skins of taxidermied animals are often prepared in such a way as to "index the final moment of life, as the hunter saw his prey" (Desmond, 2002, p. 161). A stuffed animal, then, preserves not just an animal body, but also an encounter with the animal. The photographs of raccoons in the surveyed articles bear a strong relationship to taxidermical depiction. In almost all cases, the raccoons are locked in a head-on gaze with the camera/photographer/viewer (One article even features a drawing of a raccoon in the same position.). Many of the pictures show raccoons in cages, faces pressed to the cage and their paws grasping the bars. In

July, 2005, an article was featured on the front page of the Toronto Star, under the headline "Raccoons: They're here, they're staying, and they're bringing their brothers and sisters".(Diebel, 2005) Under the heading is a large colour photograph of a raccoon's face in extreme close-up, looking directly into the camera.

Presumably the Diebel photograph, as well as many of the other photographs in the articles surveyed, is a depiction of a wild animal. But is it? In his essay "Why Look at Animals?" art critic John Berger argues that photography depicts an invisible animal—something unseeable by the eye, an experience mediated through a technology that fosters the very alienation from animals that it documents. Paradoxically, the technology-mediated view deliberately obscures its intervention. As Brower (2005) notes, the true wildlife photograph "erases its taking," thereby leaving "no space within the image's economy for the viewer to occupy". The posed raccoon photograph accompanying the Diebel article, however, does the opposite: it emphasizes its taking by centering unabashedly on the gaze of the raccoon. The intensity of the gaze implies a receiver of the gaze and therefore also the interaction between the two. It is, if you like, a photo of raccoon and human together, with the human standing just outside the frame. They are mirroring each other.

Mirroring, however, is what domestic animals do. Berger points out that "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance" (Berger, 1980, p. 14). But he allows one exception: domestic animal companions. Pets and their owners, he says, "mirror" and "complete" one another in an act that degrades the independence of both (Berger, 1980, p. 13). The raccoon in the Diebel article photograph, by mirroring the viewer in the picture, erases both the raccoon's implicit wildness as well as our own.

Still, thinking with nostalgia about the compromised wildness in the taxidermical photographs of raccoons in these articles has its limits. We nostalgically appropriate, as Berger (1980) notes, the inner lives of domestic animals. But the status of raccoons as wild beings in a domestic limbo is clearly not one of pure subordination. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway points out the fallacy in looking at only biological evolution in animals and cultural evolution in humans. She points toward a co-evolved "natureculture." "Domestication," she notes, "is an emergent process of co-habiting" (Haraway, 2003, p. 30). One story in the surveyed articles highlights this evolution: a couple who were advised to "smoke out" raccoons that had made a den above their chimney damper. "We tried that," they protested, "but they came down the chimney, shut the damper and smoked us out" (Jackson, Aug 6, 2005, p.12).

A liminal wildness: toward a new paradigm of human-animal

The absolute polarization between domestication and wildness ignores contextual subtleties; the partition between domesticated and wild animals shares many of the

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problematic ambiguities that beset related divisions of "natural" and "non-natural," as well as "human" and "animal." Modern urban raccoons hold a unique place in this matrix, not ideally represented by a definitive designation of "tame" or "wild." As geographer Chris Philo (1998) notes, a continuum of animal inclusion and exclusion in urban spaces (where domestic pets would fall on one extreme and large wild predators on the other), handy as it may be, fails to capture the multidimensionality of animal-human experience (p. 66).

In the process of urbanization, humans exploit natural resources at the same time that raccoons exploit human resources. The resulting cultural and physical landscape bears the mark of them both. What emerges in these representations is a picture of raccoons and humans that lies somewhere between the domestic/wild dichotomy, a third kind of human-animal relationship in which the human is no longer just the hunter or the domesticator, and one in which the raccoon is neither an icon of wildness nor a servant of human conditioning. Instead, a changing cultural cartography opens a distinct space for a new urban animal to emerge. To appreciate the complexities of wildness in this analysis, we must think about the place where humans, raccoons and urban environments intersect, with each player in the interaction pursuing its own evolving domesticity in distinct ways.

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A changing cultural cartography opens a distinct space for a new urban animal to emerge.

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- Tetley, D. (2003, Dec 27). Sharing city with wildlife: Lone moose once wandered onto airstrip. *Calgary Herald*, p. B6.
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