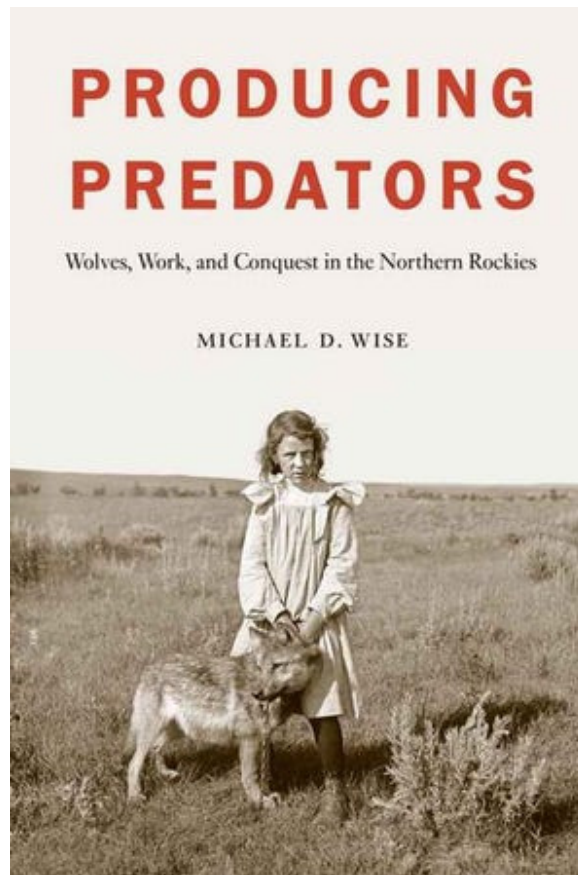


Reviews

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Questioning the Colonial Imaginary

Michael D. Wise, *Producing Predators: Wolves, Work, and Conquest in the Northern Rockies*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 210 pp. \$45.00 hc; \$45.00 e-book.



For decades now, it has been commonplace to observe that the language we use shapes the world we inhabit, influences our policies, and defines our very understanding of ourselves and our neighbors. Yet, we still have very far to go in the work of examining concepts and terms that many take for granted, categories that have been naturalized over time. In *Producing Predators: Wolves, Work, and Conquest in the Northern Rockies*, Michael S. Wise takes up two such categories — predators and producers — and

demonstrates that the meaning of these terms and their associated concepts are not self-evident. Instead, they have a long history, shaped in varying ways by multiple actors, and their meanings differ greatly across time and culture.

Producing Predators is an important call to reconsider the paradigms through which historians have examined the American west, and the ways in which we continue to replicate the very categories established as the basis of U.S. colonialism. Wise analyzes the construction of the categories of producer and predator that were established in the “frontcountry,” a swath of territory extending through the contemporary political units of Alberta and Montana. Wise’s attention to both human and non-human actors, as well as his discussion of the underlying influence of the attempt to establish capitalist frameworks, allows him to uncover the ways in which multiple constituencies shaped and experienced the rhetoric, policy, and action undergirding the attempt to categorize human and non-human animals as predators or producers.

Beginning with the first U.S. efforts to colonize the “whoop-up” country, Wise focuses on whiskey and wolves as flashpoints for portrayals of the region, adding an interesting wrinkle to the focus on commodities many historians, such as William Cronon, have trained on other regions. Wise demonstrates that there are surprising complexities to the trade in whiskey, arguing that the analysis of the injurious effects of the whiskey trade in Blackfeet communities must be tempered by the recognition that whiskey provided a means to strengthen relationships between human and non-human animals and “emboldened Native resistance to colonization” (5). Because of the increase in Bison hunting in this earlier period, which increased food sources for wolves, Wise notes that the wolf population actually increased in this early period of the expansion of colonial trade networks (5).

With the focus mostly on wolves, Wise argues that “wolf eradication served its primary purpose not as an economic fix for industrial agriculture but as part of a broader set of environmental and cultural practices that established new social boundaries between predators and producers” (xvi). When stock owners sought the eradication of wolves at the turn of the twentieth century, they employed symbols that “obscured the stock industry’s predation on beef cattle by emphasizing instead its protection of livestock against other predators” (32). This idea was enshrined not just by discursive or symbolic means, but through policy, as Wise shows in his comparative discussion of wolfing laws in the United States and Canada. Stock owners in the United States separated themselves both from animals they defined as predacious and the men who hunted them by paying to have wolves eradicated from the environment.

When Wise connects the discourse of predator and producer to the capitalist relations surrounding work in this region, he is able to make observations of importance to the world in which we live today. Discussing the connection between discourse and material relations, Wise observes, “In this brave new world of colonial capitalism, which bears much resemblance to our own, social reproduction was dictated by the power to represent labor as valuable, not by the actual power of labor to create value” (xx). This observation is an important reminder of the complex relationship between animals (human and non-human), discourse, and the market. Categories such as predator and producer were important not just for their cultural value, but because they set up a paradigm for considering the marketable value of action. Representing action as either predatory or productive in the U.S. political economy served to increase power and compensation for U.S. ranchers and conservationists while simultaneously devaluing Blackfoot relationships to animals and land.

A chapter on the creation of two slaughterhouses by U.S. officials at the Blackfoot agency contributes to historical research on programs intended to compel Indigenous assimilation to Anglo-American ideas of labor, domesticity, and sustenance. In the late nineteenth century, U.S. agents attempted to stop Blackfeet men from hunting and Blackfeet women from butchering by moving the production of meat into these slaughterhouses (49). Wise notes the tension between the food shortages experienced on the Blackfoot reservation and the imperative pursued by agents to institute cattle raising and slaughter as a productive and industrial exercise. In his description, Wise uncovers the violence of the U.S. model that the labels of “production” and “clean meat” were intended to hide (61).

The historical contingency of dividing the world into predators and producers is made clear in Wise’s discussion of Blackfeet ideas about the relationship between human and non-human animals, and in the policy decisions made to gain control of the economy in Blackfoot communities. Wise describes the efforts of the federal government to organize and reinforce an adherence to capitalist visions of individuality and labor through the establishment of slaughterhouses on the Blackfeet reservation. Although for several decades the U.S. federal government and Office of Indian Affairs Agents aligned themselves with a small segment of successful Blackfoot stockmen settled near Billings, the 1920s witnessed the emergence of the Piegan Farming and Livestock Association, which incorporated Blackfeet conceptions of kinship and reciprocity at the heart of agricultural production. Blackfeet men and women didn’t believe in the division between predator and producer, making clear the historically and culturally constructed nature of these categories.

Wise's attention to the organization of economic and environmental systems involving human and non-human animals, and their variation across communities and borders, provides a model for analyzing the impact of colonialism in the United States. Scholars such as Jodi Byrd, Daniel Heath Justice, and Mark Rifkin have called for careful analysis to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of settler colonialism that came to be ingrained over time as assumptions of societies based upon the expropriation of indigenous land. As Wise describes the beneficiaries of "production" and those villainized as "predators," it becomes clear that we need to reexamine narratives based on these categories, not only in the west, but throughout American political, governmental, and economic systems.

In questioning the boundaries of predator and producer, Wise reminds readers to remain cognizant of the ways that these discourses have shaped our understanding of the history of the west and hidden the impact of certain capitalist practices. A focus on overhunting of bison as a reason for their decline, for example, downplays or erases the impact that the change in habitat caused by the livestock industry had in diminishing possibilities for bison livelihood. As Wise describes the abuses of Blackfeet land rights by U.S. stockmen who grazed their herds on Blackfeet land illegally or paid well below a fair price for grazing rights, it is not difficult to understand that these "producers" engaged in predatory behavior, but that the earlier lines drawn around predation and production limited the recognition of their behavior because the work around stock raising was valued — and the labor of subsistence farming or hunting devalued — in the capitalist reorganization of the region.

These powerful narratives of producers and predators continued to impact the west into the 20th century, as conservationists entered the contest to shape the region. Wise notes the ways that the elevating of production shaped techniques that creators of wildlife preserves used to envision and sell their work, as they focused on the difficult work of producing these parks. Wise argues that "Western cattlemen and other stakeholders forced eastern philanthropists to frame their conservation policies within a colonial narrative of predation that has broadly informed regional wildlife controversies ever since" (100). Even though cattle ranching was a key force in the decimation of bison populations, conservationists aligned themselves with ranchers against "predators," eliding the violence and dispossession created by industrial capitalism.

As a wide-ranging and compact study, *Producing Predators* has the potential to open avenues for future research. The many actors who comprise the subjects of the book,

from U.S. wolfers to Blackfeet collectivists to Basque sheepherders, demonstrate the multitude of differing relationships to land, labor, and animals that have shaped the west in this region. Any of these actors or the moments that serve as topics for each chapter could form the basis for more extensive studies. Wise has shown that economic exchange and subsistence involved complex networks, and that policy and context shaped the meaning of producers and predators over time. By taking seriously relationships between human and non-human animals, and questioning the colonial imaginings of these relationships that imbue contemporary American policy, Wise is able to destabilize some of the assumptions of settler colonialism. There is a place for more work that takes up the multitude of similar assumptions, crafted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that often prevent us from seeing the ongoing violence of colonialism for what it is, and from appreciating radically different understandings of kinship, labor, and value that continue to rival industrial capitalism.