

## Essay

# Decolonizing Photography

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**Abstract:** How can photography challenge anthropocentrism and contribute to the decolonization process for animals? The first part of this article offers two historical examples of photography's colonial ties to hunting, and explains the harm done to animals through linking cameras and guns. The second part of this article focuses on three contemporary photographers dedicated to challenging anthropocentrism, and discusses how their work engages in decolonization as a process. The analysis and the examples presented in this article will help us to work toward a more just, peaceful, and inclusive world for all; human and nonhuman alike.

**Keywords:** animals; anthropocentrism; critical animal studies; colonization; decolonization; photography

## 1. Introduction

Photography is closely linked to colonialism. Since its invention as part of the industrial revolution, photography has been used to communicate, contain, preserve, survey, and control. In this article, I will explore this question: knowing photography's ties to colonization, can it truly become a tool to help humans engage in the decolonization process to reimagine our relationship with animals? First, I will define "photographic colonization" and briefly discuss one emergent theme that applies to animals. Second, I will discuss how photography can challenge anthropocentrism and contribute to the process of "decolonizing" for animals. To do this, I will examine three contemporary photography projects that center on animals and discuss how this work engages in the decolonization process. The analysis and the examples presented in this article will help us to work toward a more just, peaceful, and inclusive world for all; human and nonhuman alike.

## 2. Photography and Colonial Language

### 2.1. Define Colonialism

I will begin with a definition.<sup>1</sup> Colonialism is the act of a dominant power forcing their culture, values, and beliefs onto another culture through violence and oppression. In the process, the subordinate group loses their traditions, language, and customs either through destruction or appropriation. As a result, the subordinate group's culture and history fades both collectively and individually. In other words, through the process of colonization, a subordinate group's culture and values are demeaned or replaced to the point of erasure. For the purposes of this article, I define "photographic colonialism" as using a camera to dominate while the resulting photographs depict and support the values of the dominant culture, all while repressing the subordinate culture(s). Photographic colonialism has already been widely written about. A few scholars who have expertly covered this topic include Malek Alloula (1986); Matthew Brower (2011); Teja Cole (2019); Rebecca DeRoo (2002); Hight and Sampson (2002); Donna Haraway (1984); Paul Landau (1998); Lucy Lippard ([1992] 2019); James Ryan (2000); John Tagg (2019); and Susan Sontag (1977). I will not reiterate this scholarship here. Instead, I would like to highlight one theme that emerges from this writing and briefly discuss how it contributes



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to harmful attitudes towards animals that still linger today. That theme is the linguistic colonial language that connects hunting and photography. While there are many themes that come from colonialist photography, and this particular one may seem as though it is a minor point, I highlight it here because of its ubiquity as seen in advertising, documentary photography, and its lingering presence today.

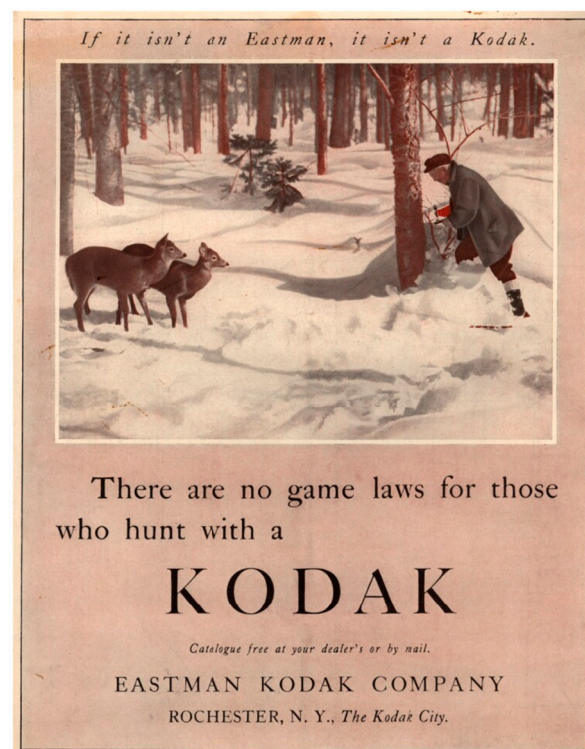
## 2.2. Shooting

The language we use for photography can be colonial. For instance, images are “shot”, subjects are “captured”, and photographs are edited or developed by “processing”. Colonialist language can also be seen with some photographic equipment. For example, “master” and “slave” are terms used to describe the transmitter and receiver used with strobe lighting.<sup>2</sup> This language is undoubtedly problematic and it points to some of the power dynamics inherent in photographing. Since its invention, photography terminology has been linked to hunting. For instance, in 1860 Sir John Herschel (inventor of the anthotype, cyanotype, and photographic “fixer”) first discussed the idea of taking multiple images in rapid succession as “snapshots” (Hirsch 2009, p. 141), a military term for taking aim at a fast moving target (Landau 1998, p. 152). Colloquially “snapshot” is still used today to refer to a photograph taken quickly and casually. Other photographic terms such as “film cartridges” (for roll fill) and “multiple firings” (for continuous exposures) denote a link between the camera and the gun (Landau 1998, pp. 151–52). Even today, large format film cameras require the photographer to “cock the shutter” before making an exposure. This language positions the photographer as a hunter—someone who is “taking,” “capturing”, or “shooting” someone. Susan Sontag famously made this connection between guns and cameras in her 1977 book *On Photography*. In describing a cultural shift toward ‘ecology safaris’, Sontag writes “The hunters have Hasselblads instead of Winchesters; instead of looking through a telescopic sight to aim a rifle, they look through a viewfinder to frame a picture” (Sontag 1977, p. 15). Language choices are not arbitrary nor are they benign. The words we use reveal cultural attitudes and ideologies and contribute to how we treat others<sup>3</sup>. Randy Malamud succinctly explains, “The terminology reflects our cultural conceptions of animals: the words mold our ways of envisioning” (Malamud 2012, p. 10). In this quote, Malamud is speaking about the words we choose to pluralize animals, but his point can also be applied to problems with connecting a camera to a gun, especially when photographing animals. The problem is that these word choices shape how we regard and interact with animals. As an example, I offer two historical photography examples that address the harm caused by colonial language: Kodak’s 1909 advertising campaign and the writing and photographs of hunter Aurthur Dugmore. These two are by no means the only examples, but they were chosen because they reveal the literal harm that can come to animals through this colonial framing.

## 2.3. Kodak Advertisement

In 1909, Kodak capitalized on the connection between guns and cameras with their marketing campaign tagline “There are no game laws for those who hunt with a Kodak” (Kovacs 2015, p. 6). This advertising campaign paired the tagline with a variety of photographs that depicted white men hunting or fishing as they ‘lined up a shot’ in order to photograph wildlife. This advertising campaign is a response to the Lacey Act in the USA (Kovacs 2015, p. 6) which passed in 1900, making it a federal offense to traffic illegally killed game across state borders and making permits a requirement for the transport of certain plant and wildlife species in and out of the USA (Wisch 2003). By connecting hunting and photography in this way, Kodak makes a joke out of the domination of wildlife, as shown in the image (below) with a photographer and two deer. In this advertisement, we see a man in the wintery woods taking his “aim” at two deer who are looking directly at him. Instead of a gun, he holds a folding Brownie Kodak camera in his hands. The point of this advertisement is to create a pun on “shooting” and present the camera as a liberating tool for man’s need and right to hunt—a necessity that ultimately brings “man” closer

to salvation (Haraway 1984, pp. 20, 25, 42). This advertisement supports this ideology with a joke: the camera is liberating not because the deer are spared, but because hunters will not be bothered by governmental laws. The problem with this joke is that the dual meaning of shooting does not make life better for animals. Instead, Kodak's word choice supports the colonial notion that humans are entitled to hunt animals and supports the notion that humans are responsible for which animals get to live or die. Furthermore, this advertisement supports human superiority by asserting that humans have a right to look at animals any way they choose (Malamud 2012, p. 74). This is the colonialist mindset embedded in hunting and hunting trophy photographs, and it causes direct harm and suffering to the animals who are pictured (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** *There are no game laws for those who hunt with a Kodak*, “Color” photograph, 1915. Emergence of Advertising in America—Ad #A0160. John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History. Duke University David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850–1920. Direct link: <https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/r4513wk5w> (accessed on 25 March 2023). This image is Free Use with attribution.

At the time Kodak ran this advertisement “camera hunting” had already been around for approximately 20 years. The term “camera hunting” was coined in 1892 by George Bird Grinnel (Brower 2011, p. 51) and it was established as a skill-based sporting activity where animals were “captured” in their natural habitats (Brower 2011, p. 26). In his 2011 book *Developing Animals* Matthew Brower notes that “camera hunting” was not an alternative to hunting animals, and for some hunters (such as ones who also used dogs to track animals) “photography was only a stage in the hunting process that culminated in the death of the animal” (Brower 2011, p. 38). This is exactly what has happened in the photograph “Wounded Lion” by Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore—the next example.

#### 2.4. “Wounded Lion” by Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore

The photograph “Wounded Lion” by Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore provides an example of this same speciesist and anthropocentric ideology, but first some context is needed. As the connection between guns and photography grew, so did the popularity in wildlife and trophy hunting, especially among European and American white men who would some-

times travel to “exotic” colonized locations and use photography to document their hunting trophies (Ryan 2000, p. 208). During these “exotic” hunting expeditions, sometimes hunters would intentionally wound the animal in order to get an up-close image and/or to amplify the danger and courage of the photographer (Ryan 2000, pp. 208, 216). These photographs were then shared through memoirs, books, magazine articles, and lectures to illustrate the hunter’s conquest while also announcing the white man’s domination and supremacy over these colonized lands. The intersectional layers of oppression cannot be ignored and it is impossible to discuss the oppression of one group without acknowledging the hurt and oppression of another (Crenshaw 1989, pp. 152–54, 166–67; Deckha 2012, p. 541). As an example, I would like to discuss the photograph “Wounded Lion” by Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore<sup>4</sup>, which appears in his 1910 book *“Camera Adventures in the African Wild”* along with an account of how two lions stalked him in daylight and nearly killed him. In retelling the story of the lion hunt, Dugmore notes that despite his “gun bearer” not setting his gun correctly, his fine shooting skills allowed him to wound one of the lions. What is also noteworthy is that somehow, in the midst of this danger, Dugmore had time to photograph the lion. Dugmore writes “I signaled to my camera bearer, who was waiting between me and camp, and he came running toward me. His course led him about seventy yards from the second lion, which had its back broken, and as he rushed past, the lion gave a frightful roar, and the poor negro thought his last moment had come, and completely collapsed. It was with difficulty I persuaded him that he was not in immediate danger, and that I wanted him to go for some more ammunition so that I could pursue the wounded beast and put the other one out of its misery” (Dugmore 1910, p. 84). Dugmore never found the lions and lamented “... I ceased regretting the loss of the fine skin which I should greatly have liked to keep as a souvenir of my fortunate escape” (Dugmore 1910, p. 84). There are intersectional layers of oppression here that I would like to examine. First, Dugmore is a wealthy Westerner traveling to a foreign land with the intention to stalk, conquer, and collect native wildlife. These are imperialist intentions with colonial outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Second, the issue of race cannot be ignored. Dugmore’s description of his guide as “my camera bearer” and “the poor negro” demonstrates condescension and racism. By identifying his guide in relation to his usefulness to Dugmore (i.e., “my camera bearer”), Dugmore shows their relationship as one of control and domination, with Dugmore as the one being served. Furthermore, Dugmore’s mention of his guide’s skin color points to the racism and white supremacy embedded in his comments. When Dugmore describes his guide’s trepidation about being near a wounded hungry lion as “‘the poor negro’ who nearly fainted because he didn’t understand”, he is perpetuating white supremacy by identifying his guide’s skin color as he belittles and mocks his fear. Third, Dugmore is insensitive to the lion with a broken back—an injury he caused and whose pain is now clearly visible as evidenced by the crying and roaring—and Dugmore’s only regret is that he was not able to commemorate this drama with more than a photo. This callousness and violence demonstrates the literal hurt that can be caused by speciesism and anthropocentrism. When we bring all of these intersectional layers of oppression together—imperialism, colonialism, racism, speciesism, and anthropocentrism—we can see how connected these issues are and how a photograph can call our attention to not just one concern, but multiple layers of oppression simultaneously (Deckha 2012, p. 530). I would like to return now to the photograph “Wounded Lion” and discuss how these intersectional concerns are visualized.

Although it might not be immediately obvious, the photograph “Wounded Lion” visually reveals these intersectional layers of trauma and oppression. In the image, we see a solitary lion laying in a field, which suggests he is in a natural setting. The lion fills about a third of the frame, which suggests he is in close proximity to the photographer. The lion’s ears are lowered and his mouth is open, yet it is not clear if he is roaring or crying. Without knowing the context for this image, the viewer might wonder why a roaring lion might be so close to a photographer without standing, charging, or posturing an attack. In other words, how was the photographer able to “shoot” this wild animal and “capture” this display of ferocious teeth? This is where the intersectional layers of



oppression embedded within this image come into play. We are presented with an unusual, perhaps dynamic, view of an animal in a natural environment, but what we do not see is where the oppression and colonization lies. For instance, all the native people who helped make this photograph possible are invisibilized (Landau 1998, p. 152). There are no names given for the “gun bearer”, “camera bearer”, or guides who helped Dugmore navigate his way in Africa. It is as if they do not exist since they are unpictured and unnamed. Another aspect of colonialism (also manifesting through absence) is invisibility of the nature photographer, which gives the viewer a false sense of having “transparent access to nature” (Brower 2011, p. xiv). While this may seem innocuous, by making the photographer and the conditions the photograph were made in invisible, the viewer is left to think of nature and animals as something that is distinct and apart from humans (Brower 2011, pp. 88, 131, 194). This is a form of colonialism because it not only categorizes nature and animals as “other”, but it also denies any responsibility the photographer might have while photographing. In the case of “Wounded Lion” the lion is depicted as alone and in his natural habitat. We can’t see that his roaring (or crying) is the result of the photographer having “shot” him. The lion’s gesture and very presence in this image is a result of photographic colonization. Furthermore, Dugmore shared this image in his memoir and in lectures and it helped support his persona as a brave and courageous adventurer. In other words, Dugmore literally profited from the pain and hurt of this lion (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore. *Wounded Lion*, circa 1909. This image appears in Dugmore’s book “*Camera Adventures in the African Wild*” published by Doubleday, 1910. p. 86. This image and text are in the Public Domain.

Ultimately, the problem with thinking of a camera as a means of shooting, capturing, preserving, and collecting is that in addition to causing literal hurt and pain, we risk “othering” our subject and projecting our biased perceptions and culture onto the subject. This kind of projection, or “overlay” (Kiddle 2020, p. 31), is the work of photographic colonization and it always inflicts pain and hurt. So what can be done about

this? “Decolonization” is a process that offers a multifaceted approach to learning, thinking, and healing (Mercier 2020, p. 54). I carefully use the word “approach” because the practice of decolonization is a healing process, rather than a theory or theoretical tool (Elkington and Smeaton 2020, p. viii; Laenui 2000, p. 150; Smith 2021, p. 112). Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes about the problems with the term “postcolonialism” and how decolonization as a process offers a more accurate and poignant response to colonialism because it involves a “web” (Mercier 2020, p. 54) of ongoing actions from a myriad of cultural places that are not primarily situated in academic discourse. “Naming the world as “post-colonial” is, from Indigenous perspectives, to name colonialism as finished business. . . . There is rather compelling evidence that in fact this has not occurred. And, even when they have left formally, the institutions and legacy of colonialism have remained. Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power” (Smith 2021, p. 112). Decolonization as a process takes many forms, is necessarily fluid and inclusive, and involves multiple actions. Some of these decolonizing actions can include looking, listening, and learning with openness (Thomas 2020, p. 108), storytelling (Smith 2021, p. 166), and questioning relationships of power and control (Jackson 2020, p. 90). These particular actions are employed by contemporary photographers JoAnne McArthur, Isa Leshko, and Colleen Plumb. Through their work, each photographer makes a conscious and concerted effort to see in new ways, to challenge the status quo by depicting the powerless, and to imagine a more inclusive world for ALL, human and nonhuman alike.

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that the scholarship around decolonization as a process is largely focused on humans, not animals. Its emphasis is to reclaim and recenter Indigenous and marginalized peoples and offer alternate, inclusive ways of thinking, seeing, acquiring knowledge, expressing culture, and governing. I make this point because I am not suggesting this work could or should include animals. Instead, I am borrowing from this writing and applying it to actions photographers can engage in as they challenge anthropocentrism.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Contemporary Photography: Decolonizing by Challenging Anthropocentrism

#### 3.1. Define Anthropocentrism and Decolonization

Again, I will start with a definition. Anthropocentrism is the notion that humans are the most important factor when considering morals and questions about nature and the environment.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, photography is largely anthropocentric. Perhaps this is because photography is made by humans and for humans. With that said, how can photography contribute to the decolonization process by creating images that encourage humans to think differently or perhaps even act on behalf of “others” such as nonhumans who have no use for photography at all? In this section, I will examine three photography projects: “We Animals” by JoAnne McArthur; “Allowed to Grow Old” by Isa Leshko; and “Thirty Times A Minute” by Colleen Plumb. I will examine how these three photography projects challenge anthropocentrism and, in the process, engage in the process of decolonization.

Again, a definition is needed. Decolonization is a healing process that seeks justice and recovery from the harm caused by colonialism. There are many scholars who have written about decolonization<sup>8</sup>, though for the purposes of this article I am borrowing from Pōkā Laenui’s analysis outlined in his essay “Process of Decolonization” in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (150–160). Laenui is an attorney and civil rights activist, and in this essay he describes decolonization as a process that involves five overlapping steps. They include recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action (Laenui 2000, pp. 152–58). I will summarize here.

1. Rediscovery and Recovery. This is where one rediscovers their culture by connecting with what remains.
2. Mourning. This step involves grief and anger. Laenui notes that lashing out may be part of this stage.

3. Dreaming. This is where the new possibilities of a different social order are imagined. Laenui poetically likens this phase to a fetus developing in the womb.
4. Commitment. In this stage, a mission statement and/or clear direction forward is established. It is essential that this commitment comes from a consensus among the colonized people.
5. Action. This is the last step where actions are taken. Laenui writes “The responsive action is one for survival. The action called for in the fifth phase of decolonization is not a reactive but a proactive step taken based on consensus of the people” (Laenui 2000, p. 158).

Laenui stresses that these first three stages are not linear and that there is fluidity between them, with the stages often experienced out of order. Only the fifth stage, action, is dependent on the fourth, commitment (Laenui 2000, p. 158). Although Laenui does not talk about animals at all and his writing is focused on these stages as they apply to human rights, I am drawn to Laenui’s mapping of the decolonization process because it beautifully charts the messy terrain of healing and creating a new way of being, thinking, and “seeing”. These same aspects are essential to the ways photographers can engage in the decolonization process when picturing animals. I want to acknowledge that photography has many limitations (some of which I discussed above) and it may be difficult, if not impossible, to completely move away from the colonizing aspects of photography. In questioning what photography can really do for animals, I am reminded of Audre Lorde’s words “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984, p. 104). Photography is an imperfect tool. In addition to anthropocentric framing, it is important to note that traditional photography uses materials that come from animal products (gelatin used in film and photographic paper). However, the question becomes one of assessing whether, despite its flaws, photography can become a useful tool to influence a wide human audience through its ubiquitous nature. Knowing its ties to colonization, can photography truly help us humans move through the decolonization process in our relationship with animals? The photography projects discussed below provide an answer.

### 3.2. *We Animals*

JoAnne McArthur is an animal photojournalist and founder of *We Animals Media*, a photography agency dedicated to telling the stories of the animals that surround us but who we might not see. “Animal photojournalism” is a term that McArthur coined. It means that the photographs are used to tell journalistic-style stories and that the images emphasize justice for animals (“What Is Animal Photojournalism?” 2023, *We Animals Media* website). These photographs are often graphic in nature since McArthur does not shy away from telling the stories of animal abuse, confinement, exploitation, and slaughter. She travels around the globe documenting animals, peering into cages, and shining light on animals who have been hidden away from the public eye (McArthur 2023, McArthur website). By exposing animal suffering and presenting it through journalistic media, McArthur asks us to reckon with how we treat animals both collectively and individually. This relates to Laenui’s first two steps in the decolonization process: “rediscovery and recovery”, and “mourning”. In the first decolonization stage, “rediscovery and recovery”, Laenui stresses the importance of reconnecting with one’s culture and history in a substantive way and stresses that this cannot be done through the media since the media is most often limited due to an outsider perspective (Laenui 2000, pp. 153–54). Given this context, comparing Laenui’s “rediscovery and recovery” phase to McArthur’s photojournalism may seem incongruous. I acknowledge that when we use anthropocentric tools (such as photography) to depict animals, we risk projecting our human perceptions and desires onto the animals, which is a form of colonization. Along those same lines, it is important to stress that a photograph is never ‘window on the world’ (Szarkowski 1978, p. 25) and is not able to show ‘the truth’. Instead, a photograph, even a journalistic one, only shows ‘a truth’ (Barthes 1981, p. 115; Borge 2019, p. 59; Grundberg 2019, p. 252; Krauss 1982, pp. 317–18). The way a photograph is composed, what is selected to be part of the composition, what is

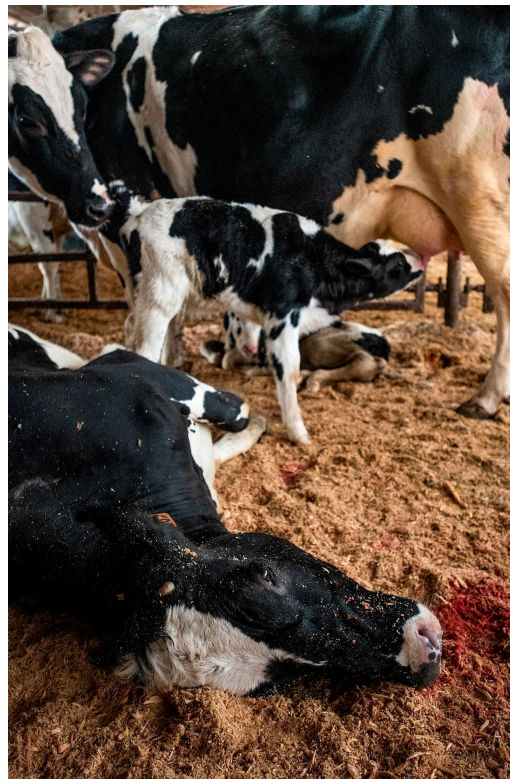
left out, how the subject is gesturing, and what is going on at the edges of the frame are just a few of the photographic *choices* made by the photographer within each exposure. There are many, many more, and each choice is made from a biased perspective. As John Tagg writes, “Photographs are never ‘evidence of history’; they are themselves historical” (Tagg 2019, p. 310). I mention photography’s bias and perspective because I am not suggesting that McArthur’s photographs allow us to ‘rediscover and recover’ something authentic within human or animal culture. Instead, her work allows us to see animals in ways we never could due to access issues (i.e., factory farms) or because of cultural bias (i.e., meat animals vs. pets). Lucy Lippard speaks to the power of photography’s bias when she writes “... we have the illusion of seeing for ourselves, the way we never *would* see for ourselves, which is what communication is all about” (Lippard [1992] 2019, p. 51). It is precisely McArthur’s biased empathic view that makes her photographs so powerful.

For example, in the image “a Holstein mother has recently died” we see five dairy cows in a barn. None are looking at the camera. The cow who occupies the entire lower half of the frame is dead. A bright red blood stain frames the space around her nose, suggesting she has just died. Her newborn calf is lying alone on the ground in the distance. The calf is obscured by another mother and calf who is nursing. By intersecting this nursing scene between the dead mother and solitary calf, we see what has been lost and are asked to grieve the loss of life for the mother and the loss of nourishment and affection for her calf. What makes this photograph even more heart wrenching is the text that is paired with this image. When we read the caption, we learn that there is no happy outcome from anyone in this scene. The nursing calf will soon be removed from the mother, and if the calf is a male he will be sold for veal. His life may be worth as little as USD 3.00. For the adult milking cows in this scene, we learn their lives are spent without pleasure or freedom. They will be impregnated and milked over and over again. Within this image, there is a fifth cow who is looking in from the left side of the frame. She is watching this scene. Her presence in this image draws the viewer’s eyes from the blood stain to the nursing calf, to her gaze, and then back down to the dead cow. However, her presence is not just visual. Since her gaze is directed at the nursing mother and calf (not at the dead mother or orphan calf), the viewer’s attention is called to the milk that is being consumed by the nursing calf. The message is this milk is not made for humans. By framing the scene in this way, McArthur provides an empathetic, biased view of the suffering and cruelty inherent in the dairy industry. In other words, McArthur is challenging the status quo by picturing a scene that is hidden from the general public, and in doing so, asking us to “recover and rediscover” our relationship with animals. Scholars Keri Cronin and Lisa Kramer address the subjectivity and empathy in McArthur’s work when they write “McArthur’s photographs are not simply meant to show “the truth” in a simplistic manner. Rather, she intends them to help the viewer form a connection with what is being depicted in the photograph, a connection that is rarely facilitated in everyday life due to the linguistic and cultural barriers that separate people from the animals that become their food” (Cronin and Kramer 2018, p. 87). This is an important step in challenging anthropocentrism and engaging in the process of decolonization because it asks the viewer to look at someone outside of their immediate line of vision. McArthur’s photograph offers a chance to connect empathetically with someone who does not possess power. In addition, with this photograph (and many of the images on the *We Animals Media* website), McArthur is asking us to confront the trauma and violence inherent with factory farming.

Since McArthur is a journalist, her photographs have a wide reach. For instance, McArthur’s *We Animals Media* website houses over 20,000 images that are all available for download for free. Giving the photographs away for free is one of the ways McArthur hopes to combat the commodification and exploitation of animals. This also speaks to Laenui’s first step of decolonization, “recovery and rediscovery”. Unlike colonialist photography where photographs of the oppressed are bought, sold, and often support the photographer’s career, McArthur ends this cycle by refusing to profit from the exploitation and cruelty that these images expose. By not putting a price tag on her photographs, McArthur provides



a model for how to use photography to “recover” and “mourn” our relationship with animals and discover a new one—one based on compassion instead of profit (Figure 3).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 3.** (a) JoAnne McArthur. *In a pen of sick dairy cows, a Holstein mother has recently died. Her newborn calf lies nearby*, 2022. USA. Headline: In a pen of sick dairy cows, a Holstein mother has recently died.

Her newborn calf lies nearby. Other mothers nurse their newborns before they are separated. The calves at this farm will either be slated to become dairy cows or will be shot. Caption: The state of Vermont is known for dairy farming and milk production. In 2019, cows in Vermont produced 2.7 billion gallons of milk, with an estimated 135,000 cows living in the state (2021). Each year, more small farms close, and larger farms increase their capacity to hold cows and produce more milk. Currently, little to no incentive exists for farmers to raise male (and some unwanted female) calves to the 75-pound slaughter weight. At auction for slaughter, some calves fetch as little as USD 3.00 each, while some are killed soon after birth. Vermont does not keep records of the number of births and deaths on dairy farms in the state. Those who are not killed immediately will become dairy cows or will be raised for veal. Dairy cows and calves are commonly kept indoors during the winter months from November to May. In the barns visited during this shoot, cows under a year old were chained by their necks. In their stalls, they can stand up, lie down, and sometimes reach the animals beside them. Adult milking cows also lived indoors during the winter. Their calves are taken away from them upon birth and the mothers are milked two or more times daily. Barn floors are concrete and wet with ever-present urine and feces, a hazard that causes “splitting,” a condition where the cow slips with her legs split and cannot get up. If a cow is at risk of splitting, her ankles are tethered together, allowing her to walk only with small steps, unable to run or leap. (b) **JoAnne McArthur**. *A pig and dead piglet*, 2022. Spain. Headline: An investigation into pig farming with Animal Equality. A pig and dead piglet. Caption: Over 150 million pigs are raised in factory farms and killed for food annually. They are well documented to be exceptionally intelligent animals with cognitive abilities comparable to a human toddler. On industrial farms, many piglets are born to mothers in gestation crates, cages that confine the sow so restrictively that she cannot turn around. After piglets are born, most farms clip their front teeth and tails and castrate the males on the spot without anesthesia or pain medication of any kind. The pigs are then raised either isolated in cages or in packed groups in dark warehouses where the stench of feces and urine is overwhelming. Though pigs can live upwards of a decade, most are sent to slaughter sometime after they are only four months old.

### 3.3. *Allowed to Grow Old*

Isa Leshko is a photographer whose long-term project “Allowed to Grow Old” focuses on elderly rescued farm animals. The project involves Leshko visiting over a dozen rescues in the USA and creating intimate black and white portraits of the animals who were fortunate to live their natural life span. Leshko says “It is nothing short of a miracle to be in the presence of a farm animal who has managed to reach old age. Most of their kin die before they are six months old. By depicting the beauty and dignity of elderly farm animals, I invite reflection upon what is lost when these animals are not allowed to grow old” (Leshko 2023, Leshko website). “Allowed to Grow Old” images are created with black and white film and made with natural light only, which means no flash was used to scare the animal and no artificial lighting was brought in to alter the animal’s individual space and home. Each portrait is rich in tonality and depicts the subject with dignity, agency, and respect. In order to create these portraits, Leshko spends hours with each animal getting to know them and letting them come to her. She lays on the ground, invites investigation from them, and waits for a possible invitation to make a photograph. This is an important deviation from colonialist photography. Leshko is not “shooting” her subject, or “taking” a photograph. She is *making* a photograph through collaboration with her animal subject. Sometimes she does not photograph at all. Using a camera in this way, with patience, cooperation, and consideration of the animal’s bodily cues and agency, is one method photographers who work with animals can engage in for one of the decolonization stages—“rediscovery and recovery”. By not projecting onto the animals and by responding to animals as they are, Leshko’s portraits reveal a living being with sentience, individuality, and dignity.

Animal representation, challenging anthropomorphism, and the importance of seeing animals as individuals are topics that artist and scholar Yvette Wyatt has written extensively about. As an example, in her essay “Making Animals Matter”, Watt discusses twelve different animal-themed art exhibitions in Australia and the USA from 2005 to 2007 and

points out how the majority of the artworks in these exhibitions use animals as signifiers instead of depicting the animals as individuals (Watt 2011, p. 121). According to Watt, the danger of using animals as stand-ins is that individual animals are rendered invisible or, at best, marginalized (Watt 2011, p. 127). Randy Malamud echoes this harm from framing and viewing animals as objects. He writes “It circumscribes animals’ existence in relation to the human gaze, appraising them only in terms of their usefulness or threat (to us). Such a perspective confounds an ecologically ethical ideology in which all members of an ecosystem are interdependent and no single species is inherently privileged above any other” (Malamud 2012, p. 75). Leshko’s work offers a counter to this through an anthropocentric lens. By picturing elderly farm animals as individuals, Leshko provides an alternative way of thinking about animals and human–animal relationships. For instance, the animals pictured in “Allowed to Grow Old” are not species, nor are they not part of a herd. Instead, they are individuals with names, likes/dislikes, stories, and a history—just as with any human. With Leshko’s work, photographic portraiture is not reserved for human likeness only. In this way, Leshko subverts anthropocentrism by not privileging one species over another. She also contributes to the decolonization process by asking the viewer to “recover and rediscover” farm animals through empathetic portraits and to “dream” of a different social order by entitling animals with portraiture.

Leshko made these portraits with a Hasselblad, a manual medium-format camera often used by portrait photographers. This camera requires a slow process since there are no automatic features. Each image needs to be manually focused and exposed. The slowness of this process allows Leshko to spend more time with each animal, so the resulting image is less about freezing time and “capturing” and more about getting to know each animal as an individual. Additionally, using a medium format means that when Leshko is photographing, the camera is not blocking her face. This is important for two reasons. First, the Hasselblad requires a vertical viewfinder. This means that when Leshko photographs the camera is not obstructing her eyes. Instead, the camera is held in her hands against her body while she can glance back and forth between viewfinder and subject. This allows for greater intimacy while photographing and a deeper connection with her subjects. Second, photographing at eye level means that the photographer is neither looking up nor down at the subject. This provides equality between the photographer, subject, and viewer. The choices made by Leshko work toward challenging anthropocentrism. This provides a new way of “seeing” farm animals which contributes to the “rediscovery” stage of the decolonization process.

Lastly, to help contextualize each portrait, each portrait is titled with the animal’s name, species, and age. In her book “*Allowed to Grow Old*”, Leshko provides a biography for each animal. When the work is shared online or in an article, each portrait is accompanied by a caption that explains a bit about the oppression this animal endured and what their fellow species continue to endure. In this way, Leshko is calling attention to all the animals not pictured. By pairing the image with this text, Leshko is asking the viewer to see this fortunate individual as an exception to millions of oppressed others who are not seen and who were not “allowed to grow old”. To this extent, Leshko’s “*Allowed to Grow Old*” also embodies Laenui’s mourning stage as we grieve for the billions of animals killed well before the end of their natural lives (Figure 4).

To summarize, through Leshko’s work, we (as viewers) are asked to recover the dignity and individuality of the animal pictured, we are asked to mourn for the oppressed others who were slaughtered at a young age and not pictured here, and we are asked to dream by imagining a shared space rooted in equality, such as the one shared by the subject and photographer.



(a)



(b)

**Figure 4.** (a) **Isa Leshko.** *Bessie, Holstein Cow, Age 20.* “As a “milker” on a commercial dairy farm, Bessie was repeatedly impregnated during the first four years of her life. Most retired dairy cows are slaughtered, and their flesh is rendered into hamburger meat or pet food. Bessie was rescued while en route to the slaughterhouse”. (b) **Isa Leshko.** *Ash, Domestic Broad Breasted White Turkey, Age 8.* “As with a lot of rescued animals, not much is known about Ash’s early life. Her body, though, bore telltale signs that she had been reared on a factory farm. The tip of her beak had been severed, and her middle toes had been partially amputated. Commercially raised turkeys and chickens live in large, windowless sheds so densely crowded that the birds cannot walk without stepping on each other. There is no room for preening, foraging, or perching. Birds living in these conditions are so stressed they become abnormally aggressive and even resort to cannibalism. Rather than improving the animals’ living conditions, farmers try to minimize the damage the birds can inflict on each other by debeaking and detoeing chicks within days of their hatching”.

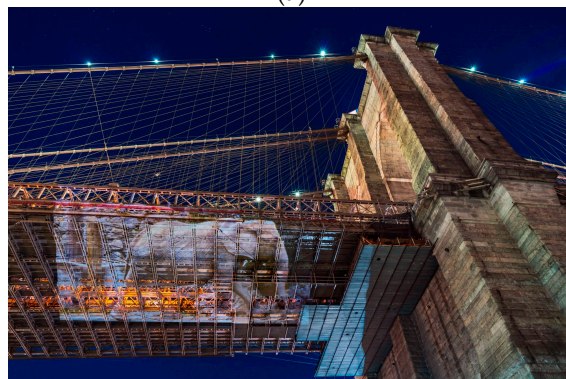


### 3.4. *Thirty Times A Minute*

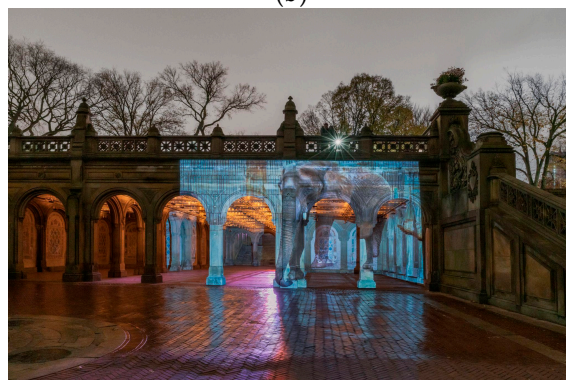
Colleen Plumb is an artist and photographer (Figure 5). Her project “Thirty Times A Minute” combines photography, video, and installations. In creating this series, Plumb first films elephants pacing and swaying in zoos and then creates short, looping videos of this behavior. Next, Plumb projects and plays this video loop onto urban buildings and in public spaces at night—places where people would not expect to encounter images of elephants, let alone images of animal suffering. Plumb then uses photography to record her site-specific projections and installations. From the photographs, she creates fine art prints and shares the work with people who did not see the installation in person. Before I discuss the meaning and context of this work as it contributes to working against anthropocentrism, I would like to say a few words about elephant pacing in captivity.



(a)



(b)



(c)

**Figure 5.** (a) **Colleen Plumb.** *Schottizie* (Cincinnati, Ohio.) At Kings Ranch, Galisteo, New Mexico, 2016. (b) **Colleen Plumb.** *Drumbo* (Vienna, Austria.) At Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 2016. (c) **Colleen Plumb.** *Gina* (Memphis, Tennessee.) At Bethesda-Terrace, Central Park, New York, 2016.

Pacing and swaying is a stereotypic behavior and coping mechanism for elephants who live in captivity (Greco et al. 2017, p. 105). A stereotypy is defined as “a repetitive invariant behaviour, which may be the result of frustration, attempts to cope with a sub-optimal environment, or a dysfunction of the central nervous system” (Hosey et al. 2013, p. 359). While there is some debate about why elephants develop pacing and swaying stereotypies (Greco et al. 2017, p. 106), it is important to note that stereotypic behavior is not normal and is generally agreed to be a sign of negative welfare for the animal. Plumb titled her project “Thirty Times A Minute”, which refers to the resting heart rate of an elephant, because she had heard circus trainers incorrectly claim that the reason the elephants swayed and paced in this way was to stay in tune to the circulation of their heartbeat (Cooke 2016, p. 130). Instead, the pacing and swaying is a physical sign that an elephant is experiencing stress and/or distress.

In considering the relationship between photography, captivity, and colonialism, Plumb writes “Thirty Times a Minute (the resting heart rate of an elephant) explores the way animals in captivity function as symbols of persistent colonial thinking, that a striving for human domination over nature has been normalized, and that consumption masks as curiosity” (Plumb 2023, Plumb website). Plumb is describing some of the issues inherent in keeping wild animals captive. She is critiquing the very structure of the zoo and claiming that it supports an anthropocentric framework valuing humans above all other animals. Environmental studies professor and animal rights activist Dale Jamison also wrote about this very issue in his essay “Against Zoos”. Jamison writes “Zoos teach us a false sense of our place in the natural order. The means of confinement mark a difference between humans and animals. They are there at our pleasure, to be used for our purposes. Morality and perhaps our very survival require that we learn to live as one species among many rather than as one species over many” (Jamieson 2006, p. 142). Jamison is speaking about the speciesism inherent in anthropocentrism and how the zoo as an institution supports this ideology. In other words, zoos are a manifestation of the colonization of animals. Plumb’s artwork and photography challenges this ideology.

In order to do this, Plumb starts with the same imagery that any zoo visitor might see—she films elephants pacing and swaying in their zoo enclosures. She then takes these images and subverts the zoo structure by projecting the elephant videos onto a variety of uninvited outdoor places and spaces. Seeing a captive elephant who is rocking back and forth while going nowhere projected larger than life and illuminated only by a man-made structure can be arresting. This is precisely Plumb’s point. She writes, “The presence of massive, intelligent, far-roaming, emotional animals such as elephants in urban zoos exemplifies contradiction and discordance, and my public projections of their image onto urban walls and out-of-context surfaces adds to the layers of incongruity” (Plumb 2023, Plumb website). With this work, Plumb places the elephant in the same space as the viewer and shows the absurdity, domination, and suffering involved with keeping wild animals caged. The elephants are as out of context in the zoo as they are projected into the cityscapes. In this way, Plumb is making the elephant’s suffering too large and too bright to ignore.

In applying Laenui’s decolonization stages, “Thirty Times A Minute” seeks to “recover” the captive elephant’s invisibility by making them larger than life and placing them in a different context. Plumb asks us to “mourn” their suffering and “dream” of a new way of being and seeing through her installations and photography. The rich colors and beauty within the photographs’ nightscapes ask us to imagine elephants differently—not as captive victims or idealized wild animals, but as complex social creatures who are caught in an environment they do not belong in. Plumb’s photographs depict a dream-like space that is almost surreal, and it is in this space where we can “build dreams on further dreams which eventually become the flooring for the creation of a new social order”, as Laenui writes of his third decolonizing stage, “dreaming” (Laenui 2000, p. 155). While Laenui’s fourth and fifth stages “commitment” and “action” may not seem as apparent, I would argue that Plumb’s photographic record of these installations leave a trace that begs for a commitment to seeing animals as sentient beings and worthy of our moral consideration. Since these

photographs can be shared far and wide, Plumb reaches a wide audience and encourages people who were not thinking about elephants or captive animals at all to reconsider our enslavement of wild animals in zoos. The action that follows is up to each person who sees this work.

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to return to the question at the heart of this article, which is, knowing photography's ties to colonization, can photography be used as a tool to engage in the decolonization process and re-image (and reimagine) kinder relationships with animals? In order to answer this question, we must first acknowledge photography's ties to colonialism and reckon with some of the ways it has been (and still is) used as a weapon to literally and metaphorically hunt animals. This is the work of both colonization and anthropocentrism, and it causes literal hurt and pain. Once we have acknowledged this history, we can consider how photography might be used differently. Decolonization as a process offers a multifaceted approach to rebuilding, reimagining, and healing from the work of colonization.

The process of decolonization is not a simple formula, nor is it something someone engages in once. Decolonization emphasizes many actions and overlapping steps, such as listening and looking with openness, challenging normative views, and positioning the oppressed in the center. These particular decolonizing actions are the same goals of the photographic work of three contemporary photographers who feature animals—JoAnne McArthur, Isa Leshko, and Colleen Plumb. Specifically, through their work we see a concerted effort to picture beings who have been overlooked and offer alternative ways of seeing those who have been hidden; we see a commitment to not profiting from animal suffering; and we are given a space to mourn, dream, and imagine new relationships with animals. Therefore, despite photography's ties to colonization, photography—when thoughtfully, carefully, and explicitly used as part of the decolonization process—can challenge anthropocentrism and work towards healing and building a kinder world for all, humans and nonhumans alike.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This definition of colonization draws from [Smith \(2021\)](#); [Hooks \(1992\)](#), and multiple essays found in the anthology "Imagining Decolonization" ([Kiddle 2020](#)). (Please see the bibliography section for the full list of authors and essay titles found in this anthology).
- <sup>2</sup> Recently there has been a push from photographers, historians, and scholars to remove this language and replace it with more accurate descriptions. In particular, the terms "master" and "slave" have received quite a bit of attention. Here are three examples.
  - Jessie O'Rielly-Conlin addresses problematic colonialist language for photography in a blog post titled "Decolonizing the Language of Photography" written as part of "Photographers Without Borders" ([O'Rielly-Conlin 2021](#)). <https://www.photographerswithoutborders.org/online-magazine/decolonizing-the-language-of-photography> (accessed on 23 March 2023).
  - In June 2020 the popular online photography publication, PetaPixel about the problematic colonial (racist) terms "master" and "slave" ([Bear 2020](#)). <https://petapixel.com/2020/06/06/its-time-to-end-the-terms-slave-and-master-in-photography/> (accessed on 23 March 2023).
  - In late 2017 Canon became the first photography company to discontinue the use of this racist terminology as noted in this Fstoppers article ([Parnell-Brookes 2020](#)) <https://fstoppers.com/gear/canon-has-officially-dropped-master-and-slave-terms-497389> (accessed on 23 March 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> Language usage that shapes meaning has been widely researched through different academic lenses in the fields of business, computer science, philosophy, psychology, marketing, and sociology. Within photography, Andy Grundberg offers a clear summary of how structuralist linguistic theory has shaped postmodernism ([Grundberg 2019](#), p. 245).

- 4 James Ryan also discusses Dugmore's photography in his essay "Talking Pictures: Interviews with Photographers Around The World" (Ryan 2000, p. 214–15).
- 5 In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith succinctly explains " . . . colonialism is but one expression of imperialism" (Smith 2021, p. 23).
- 6 In this context, the terms "borrowing" and "applying" are attributed to an insight by Dr. Nik Taylor (Personal communication, 30 March 2023).
- 7 This definition is synthesized and adapted from Weitzenfeld and Joy (2014).
- 8 A few important texts include "Decolonizing Methodologies 3rd Edition" (Smith 2021); "Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision" (Battiste 2000); and "Imagining Decolonization" (Kiddle 2020).

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