

# The Spotted Hyena in Popular Culture and the Biopolitical Implications for Conservation Strategy

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**Annika Hugosson**

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

**Abstract:** The hyena has been depicted as a villain for millennia, with examples spanning from ancient European texts to today's popular culture. In the past 30 years, especially, catalysed by Disney's *The Lion King*, the hyena-as-villain has been cycled throughout various media. By taking a critical animal studies approach to analysing Western media content depicting hyenas, specifically the spotted hyena, I theorize the implications of morally othering hyenas such that they are rendered killable, which relegates them relative to other species-specific conservation concerns. Hyenas are vilified in part through misrepresentations of their actual ecological roles, the biopolitical ramifications of which are discussed. Hyena conservationists have long argued that shifting negative attitudes about hyenas is paramount to conserving them; beyond quantifiable conservation-minded objectives, there is a moral impetus to eliminate suffering and provide for the welfare and quality of life for individual hyenas. Rather than dismissing caricatures of hyenas as harmless, we must acknowledge that fictional representations of hyenas do not exist in isolation from actual hyenas and their lifeworlds.

**Keywords:** Spotted hyena, conservation, charisma, Disney, biopolitics

## Introduction

Perhaps nowhere is the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*)<sup>1</sup> so memorably represented in Western culture than in Disney's *The Lion King*. The animated film premiered in 1994, introducing millions to the cackling trio of Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed. While the evil, laughing, deceptive, immoral hyena is found dating back to ancient literature, Disney contemporized this representation and delivered it to a massive, global audience. The 'hyenic villain' was never before quite so accessible to the general public, including children. In response to Disney's depiction, hyena researcher Stephen Glickman published 'The Spotted Hyena from Aristotle to *The Lion King*: Reputation is Everything', in which he proclaimed a 'serious miscarriage of biological justice' that 'can be traced to the poor public reputation of the hyena' (503). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) distributed a robust, 164-page Hyena Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan in 1998, compiled by Mills and Hofer, which in its very first paragraph propounded:

Perhaps the most important challenge facing those of us committed to the conservation of this group of animals is to overcome the very strong negative feelings many people have towards hyaenas. Until they are viewed in a more positive light it will be difficult to effectively implement management plans for hyaenas. (vi)

An entire chapter of the IUCN's conservation strategy plan, which cites Glickman's paper on the hyena's reputation, is dedicated to 'Cultural and Public Attitudes: Improving the Relationship between Humans and Hyaenas'.

For hundreds of millions of *The Lion King* viewers, children and adults alike, this film was likely their first ever encounter with a hyena, albeit a fictional, cartoon version. Aside from seeing captive hyenas in zoos or free-living hyenas in documentaries (where, in either case, humans are still controlling the narrative) the majority of Westerners will never encounter an actual hyena. This means that the media's depiction of hyenas is all the more impactful. According to Bombieri et al., 'most people can live their entire lives without seeing a predator outside of a zoo or an aquarium and therefore rely on the media to form their opinion about them' (582). Brottman writes, '[s]urely very few of those people who claim to despise hyenas

can have lived through a traumatic encounter with one, even at a zoo' (118). Discussing representations of apex nonhumans in film, Ford and Hammerton note the importance of film and media in informing views, declaring this an area of critical concern given the potential for media to shape public debate, attitudes, and conservation policies. In zoos, work persists to this day to debunk myths perpetuated in *The Lion King* and elsewhere. For example, the San Diego Zoo writes on its spotted hyena webpage: '[s]o, you think you know all about spotted hyenas – the ones known to “laugh”? They’re in lots of cartoons and movies, and they’re usually in the role of giggly villains. But is that a fair description?' ('Spotted Hyena' par. 1).

At present, the spotted hyena's conservation status is 'least concern' according to the IUCN's authority, though populations are decreasing across Africa. According to the most recently available data, the most stable spotted hyena populations are in protected areas in southern and eastern Africa. In eastern, central, and western Africa, populations are declining primarily due to habitat loss, poisonings, hunting, and culling (Höner and Bohm). The spotted hyena is not yet threatened with imminent extinction. However, they are keystone species in many of their ecosystems – a species which 'exerts a great effect on its ecosystem that is disproportionate to its abundance ... without this species, the environment might degrade, change drastically, or even collapse' (Ronis). This is the ecologically grounded argument for hyena conservation; a critical animal studies perspective maintains that nonhuman animals deserve moral consideration and protection regardless of perceived relative importance to other animals, including humans. Advocating for a 'pragmatic balance' between traditional conservation objectives and animal welfare concerns, Sekar and Shiller argue that 'conservation science should adjust its priorities in response to the overwhelming evidence that animals think and feel' (630). Citing developments already in place to achieve this balance, such as the compassionate conservation movement, the authors acknowledge that these processes will take time.

Conservation science and ethics debates abound related to prioritizing individual welfare versus collectivities, and ecocentric versus biocentric values (Srinivasan). As such, the tensions between anthropocentric values and the intrinsic values of nonhuman nature persist in conservation discourse and practice (Srinivasan). Hare et al. write that people attach value to

species in order to morally justify their conservation, with assigned designation as keystone species and ascription of certain cultural status factoring into this valuation. While some may hope to see an evolution of conservation ethics which intrinsically values nonhuman nature, amending the narrative of the hyena as ecologically reckless is a productive first step to justifying their protection, based on what we know from conservation psychology (Hare et al.).

Destabilizing the lion-versus-hyena rivalry may also help with this re-narrativization given the unbalanced attribution of nonhuman charisma stretched between the two. Considering humans' entrenched moral concerns about other species, how can the hyena, so long depicted as *immoral*, come to be justified as conservable within the scope of human morality? Combatting negative depictions is made more challenging by the fact that certain aspects of supposed hyena villainy contradict each other: hyenas are sometimes shown as cowardly timid scavengers, but also as tenacious, fearsome, militarized predators. Until hyenas are more positively viewed, their suffering at the hands of humans may proceed without being meaningfully challenged. Given the media's power in informing perceptions about hyenas, we must reflect on the reality that representations of hyenas do not exist in isolation from actual hyenas and their lifeworlds. Even if impacts on animals' individuals lives cannot be measured, demonizing narratives told about animals have consequences for the moral or intellectual character of the viewer and could influence their values, laying the groundwork for categories of animals to be rendered killable (see Haraway).

In discussing carnivore conservation as an outsider, I do not seek to diminish the realities of humans who live among hyenas and may find their own lives or their livelihoods threatened by these capable predators. This article derives from a larger work which takes local perspectives into account through analyses of local news media, social media, and local mythologies about hyenas; thorough discussion of local case studies is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>2</sup> Spotted hyenas' ranges across Africa are vast which also means they are in contact with diverse groups of humans. Pastoral peoples concerned for livestock would generally relate differently to hyenas than urbanites. In both Harar, Ethiopia and near Abuja, Nigeria, 'tame' hyenas are tourist attractions – though it should be said the two situations are disparate, with the Ethiopian hyenas free to roam, and the Nigerian hyenas captured in the wild and later muzzled

and chained (Baynes-Rock, *Among the Bone Eaters*; Sterne). Religion also impacts storytelling about hyenas and other animals throughout a vast continent with regional religious diversity. For example, a study of wildlife perceptions in Guinea-Bissau found that religion influenced anthropocentrism, and how species are valued (Costa et al.), and in Malawi, spotted hyenas are closely associated with witches (Morris). These examples in no way represent an exhaustive summary of factors influencing human-hyena relationships across Africa; rather, they demonstrate the diversity and dynamism of these complex relationships. Reducing human-carnivore conflict towards improved conservation outcomes is most effective when there is collaboration with local communities. Acceptance of strategies is influenced not only by livestock predation but also by cultural and emotional factors (Dheer et al.). Given the complex overlapping religious, cultural, economic, and emotional factors at play, suggesting conservation and coexistence strategies without acknowledging the human members of a given ecosystem is careless at best, and at worst perpetuates the colonial character that overshadows many conservation efforts throughout Africa (Garland) (for more on the challenges of living alongside hyenas, including attacks on humans and livestock animals, see Somerville). This essay seeks to compile a snapshot of hyena realities versus perceptions, to think critically about the ‘real’ versus the representational, and to problematize the hyena’s depiction within a ‘folk taxonomy’ of human imagination created largely by and for people who do not actually live among hyenas. How animals exist in our minds assigns symbolic value that affects how we view, interact with, and make decisions about animals who actually live among us.

### **Disney’s hyenas**

In behind-the-scenes bonus footage from *The Lion King*, one producer stated, ‘one of the challenges about making *Lion King* was to try to find any kind of animal behaviour that we could emphasize or exaggerate’ (Allers and Minkoff). Real lions were brought to the film studio for observation and interaction with *The Lion King* filmmakers. One of the outcomes of the in-person meetings with lions was that the filmmakers were shocked by the length of the lion’s tongue and made sure to exaggerate that feature in the film (Allers and Minkoff), an aesthetic

exaggeration that is benign, if not endearing. Ford and Hammerton note that in animations targeted for children, such depictions often contribute to a nurturing or heroic characterization. During production, hyena researchers sought to make the hyenas' representation positive, but they were not successful. According to Glickman (1995), artists from the Disney studios spent two days with the hyenas of the University of California at Berkeley. Prominent hyena researcher Laurence Frank arranged the visit, and he and other scientists asked how hyenas were going to be portrayed in the film, expressing 'a strong request that it be positive' (Glickman 504). The artists 'seemed very appreciative of the animals and said they would do their best to make them appear comical instead of evil' (Glickman 504). Frank would later call for a boycott of the movie (30). The aforementioned IUCN report laments:

[i]t is a pity that accurate information on hyaenas is not sought by commercial filmmakers such as the Walt Disney Studios. In their recent production, *The Lion King*, they have done nothing to rectify the common prejudices towards the spotted hyaena, nor, incidentally, to portray the true nature of lion society. (Mills and Hofer 101)

In *The Lion King*, Shenzi is the hyena trio's leader, her name meaning 'uncouth' in Kiswahili. Her description from *The Lion King* script: '[f]emale of the Hyena trio. Major attitude. Probably the smartest and deals the best with Scar. Most even temper' (*The Lion King Script*). Banzai, an aggressive male, bears a name that means 'to skulk or lurk' in Kiswahili. His official description states that he is the 'most quick-tempered of the Hyenas. Best with comebacks. Offsets Shenzi and Ed quite well' (*The Lion King Script*). The comparatively banal, monosyllabic name 'Ed', which holds no meaning, no Kiswahili 'exoticism', serves to remind the viewer that Ed lacks an identity beyond being simple, a naïve follower. Ed's official description: '[t]he stupidest Hyena. Has a Bill the Cat stare. Noted by warts on the tongue. Too stupid or slow to lie at the right time' (*The Lion King Script*). Ed is trivialized, a character lacking individuality, reduced to an underdeveloped caricature of a hyena. A star-studded 2019 CGI remake of *The Lion King* recapitulated the same trope of hyenas as evildoers, though actress Florence Kasumba, who voiced Shenzi in the remake, stated a key difference: '[t]hose hyenas were funny. These hyenas are dangerous' (Walt Disney Studios). *The Lion Guard* spinoff of *The Lion King* continues the movie's story, spanning generations of characters.

## What can we learn from *Jaws*?

Before diving into substantial analysis, let us ponder another well-known example of an animal demonized in film: the great white shark as depicted in *Jaws*. *Jaws*' author 'unwittingly did more to instill the intense fear and hatred of sharks than anyone else in the twentieth century' (Eilperin 45). Mosbacher cautions creators of narratives, like *Jaws*, explaining:

[W]e have little control over how our audiences will perceive, commune with, and behave following exposure to our work. Like Peter Benchley, who was bewildered at the worldwide response to *Jaws*, we may wind up creating culture-shifting products whose reach and longevity may well outlast us. (65)

Mosbacher goes on to summarize the effects of *Jaws* on actual shark populations, noting that the movie initiated a 'precipitous decline in U.S. shark populations' (63) as fishers sought trophies. According to George Burgess, director of the Florida Program for Shark Research in Gainesville, the number of large sharks fell by 50% along the eastern seaboard of North America in the years following the release of *Jaws*: 'A collective testosterone rush certainly swept through the east coast of the US. Thousands of fishers set out to catch trophy sharks after seeing *Jaws* ... and there was no remorse, since there was this mindset that they were man-killers' (Colwell). I hold a vivid memory from my childhood of visiting Universal Studios Florida and riding the *Jaws* ride. The memory is strong because I was abjectly terrified during the experience, which took guests on a boat that was pursued by an aggressive animatronic shark. The driver of the boat shot at the shark with a fake rifle as the riders cheered. Each time the shark burst out of the water his face was more bloodied. Eventually the shark was electrocuted. His burnt, bloodied body floated to the surface, and the riders cheered as we floated on to safely disembark the boat. The ride has now permanently closed.

I also recall, after the ride, a photo opportunity with a fake shark. He was prominently displayed strung up by the tail, hanging face down, mouth agape, displaying rows of sharp teeth. My family waited in line to take photos celebrating this symbolic conquest of human over nature, posing with our heads inside the shark's mouth, smiling in mockery of the once powerful

now made impotent. Mosbacher articulates *Jaws* as ‘glamoriz[ing] the conquest and defeat of a formidable, ancient predator defined, simultaneously, as soulless, possessable object, calculating, vengeful enemy’ (63), an analysis which certainly extends to this photo opportunity at the conclusion of the ride. It is remarkable to consider the messages embedded in this ride experience and this overt display of violently ‘conquering nature’ at a family theme park. This ride capitalized on fear to normalize violence against nonhuman animals, desensitizing millions of people, including countless children, to such acts. This, along with movies like *The Lion King*, socialize children to latent moral dualisms: human versus shark, lion versus hyena, where one is good and the other bad, and thus undeserving of life.

In citing the following quote from Lerberg, I propose that shark and hyena are symbolically interchangeable in their respective media portrayals, and echo Lerberg’s call for counter-narrativity:

To alleviate the totalizing representation of sharks as physical embodiments of the widely popular fictional shark from the *Jaws* films, viewers must seek out and produce counternarratives that mitigate the singular vision that circulates around contemporary representations of sharks. Such counternarratives serve as potential sites to unseat the misinformed representations of sharks that stem from *Jaws*’ cultural potency. (35)

It is not worthwhile to directly compare the shark and the hyena in terms of public perception nor conservation strategy; that is not what I am suggesting. The two species occupy distinct habitats and interact with humans in disparate ways, both in narrative and in actual experiences. Furthermore, the great white shark is, today, ranked in the top twenty of the most charismatic species, according to the general public in Western countries (Albert et al.). The shark therefore enjoys a privilege the hyena does not, by measure of this study; things seem to have improved for sharks, at least in the court of public opinion, since *Jaws* premiered in 1975 (although despite this upswing in perception, shark populations continue to be deleteriously impacted by global commercial fishing and shark finning operations). A recent article in *Frontiers in Conservation Science* elaborates further on the complexities of human-shark relations and the implications for conservation (Simpfendorfer et al.) However, the legacy of *Jaws* still shows the danger of



constructing a narrative and marring a species' reputation: a drop in US shark populations was traceable to *Jaws* (Mosbacher; Colwell). On the other side of the globe, Neff identifies *Jaws* as affecting policy responses to shark bites in Australia and thus suggests the '*Jaws* effect' still contributes to poor conservation outcomes, decades after the movie was released. The power we wield in constructing, consuming, and (re)creating animal categories, and justifying protection and persecution based on those conferred categories, is evident. Hyenas and hyena conservation efforts have suffered similarly to the great white shark of *Jaws* infamy, but without the charismatic rebound of late. As Brottman proclaimed, '[m]ost people's aversion to hyenas, clearly, has less to do with real hyenas than the context in which they are generally depicted' (118). The perceptions that result from narratives can have far-reaching, enduring consequences for the animals they depict. Ford and Hammerton explain, 'it is not only physical harm to animals on set that requires oversight, but recognition that screen and media representations have the potential to harm an entire species. This harm includes to the nonhuman species represented onscreen' (153).

### **The Circle of Life as biopolitics**

The general public believes that maintaining a healthy ecosystem is important when considering conservation policies (Coursey). The depiction of the hyenas in *The Lion King* and the many references to their gluttony – for instance the fact that they must be banished from the Pride Lands in order for the ecosystem to cope – presents a perceptual challenge that is substantiated by the aforementioned Coursey study. Of course, *The Lion King* does not pretend to be a documentary; however, messages about the hyenas' troublesome existence in a hypothetical African ecosystem abound and could impact viewers' perceptions of actual ecosystems and hyenas' right to belong within them. All other predators in the film, like the crocodiles and the big cats, are depicted as amenable members of the 'kingdom', a well-balanced community ruled by lions. If hyenas were to be integrated, the message is that the balance would be thrown off, and the ecosystem would degrade. For this reason, the hyenas are banished to a barren space, an elephant graveyard. As mentioned in the introduction, hyenas are actually a keystone species in

many of their ecosystems, *without* which these ecosystems may collapse (Ronis). When Scar (the evil lion) and his hyena army does take power, the result is a desolate, colourless landscape devoid of sustenance, with food and water supplies extremely low. Once a noble lion (Simba) takes power again, the rain comes, restoring the Pride Lands to a lush, stable ecosystem in which all may thrive. This negative, patently false depiction of the hyena's ecological role as harbingers of gross ecosystemic imbalance may impact perceptions of charisma under Lorimer's three-part definition, which includes ethological perspective as one determinant for nonhuman charisma. Negative representations of hyenas reduce their charismatic potential and in turn the value people assign to hyenas as members of their respective ecosystems.

The concept of the Circle of Life, introduced at the very beginning of *The Lion King* through an epic song, refers to a delicate, harmonious balance of nature: predators eat prey, predators become grass when they die, prey eat the grass; the cycle continues endlessly. 'Circle of Life' conjures an idyllic vision of an ecosystem and is a very important theme in *The Lion Guard* series. In the series the good hyenas are said to respect the Circle of Life, mostly scavenging for food, while the bad hyenas do not respect this system and wish to hunt and kill anything they can. The romantic notion of the Circle of Life serves to biopolitically 'other' hyenas by their selfish inability to assimilate into the moral code it ordains. In the song 'Tonight We Strike', the leader of the bad clan, Janja, sings: 'When you live in The Outlands / It's better to make your own rules / Ask anyone outside the Pride Lands / The Circle of Life is for fools'. The hyenas laugh in harmony, and the song continues, 'We go where we want when we want to / And we eat, yes we eat, as we please' ('Tonight We Strike'). The chorus of the song is a defiant: 'Tonight we strike / No one's safe so the time is right / The Circle of Life's gonna feel our bite / Tonight we strike'. Part of Janja's description on the show's fandom site reads: 'Janja is an arrogant, aggressive and greedy hyena who eats more than his fair share and has no regard for the Circle of Life. His unabated hunger has made him ruthless and willing to go to extreme measures to satisfy it' ('Janja').

As established by the code of the Circle of Life, a strange system exists in *The Lion King* wherein prey species are protected from hyenas in exchange for letting the lions hunt and eat them. Death at the teeth of a hyena is apparently worse than death by other means, perhaps

because the hyena, depicted as cruel, gluttonous, and wasteful, would kill for fun rather than for need. For an animal to die in vain would betray the utopian balance promoted by the Circle of Life. *The Lion Guard* makes obvious efforts to separate the good clan of hyenas from the bad by emphasizing various character traits, including preferred method of procuring food. The good hyenas primarily scavenge, out of respect for the Circle of Life, and the bad hyenas hunt voraciously and make quite clear that they do not respect the Circle of Life. Even among other predator species, the hyena lacks the ability to live abstemiously in *The Lion King* world – aside from those exceptional ‘good’ hyenas, who scavenge. Their goodness is also narrated by their alignment with the ruling lions.

This notion of unrestrained, violent hyenic gluttony is additionally evident in the word ‘poacher’, which is used in *The Lion King*’s first mention of hyenas: ‘slobbery, mangy, stupid poachers’. ‘To poach’ is different from ‘to hunt’, as the lions do in the film, purportedly for the good of the kingdom and never in excess. Poaching is always illicit. There is also a selfish connotation to ‘poaching’, one that implies waste (only taking valuable, sellable parts of the animal, and unceremoniously discarding the rest of the animal’s body). This connotation is conveyed in depictions of hyenas who want to hunt for the fun of sowing fear and unrest, rather than for sustenance (especially the ‘bad’ clan in *The Lion Guard*). While ‘hunting’ can be done sparingly and sustainably, ‘poaching’ is never restrained. The use of this word aligns with the belief that hyenas kill for fun, for sport, or otherwise for selfish gain rather than for need, thereby bolstering the evil depiction of the hyena who is unwelcome in an ecosystem, lest it degrade.

Social media shows the viral potential of stories of poachers being ‘righteously’ killed, either by wildlife or by other means. The celebratory tone of these stories, and the mentions of karmic retribution I routinely observe in the spread of these stories merits research, especially pertaining to the labelling of a ‘poacher’ and the rendering of poachers as instantaneously killable. According to *Survival International*, a non-profit which advocates for tribal peoples, the difference between hunting and poaching is permission. When land is stolen from tribal people in the name of conservation, ‘hunters become “poachers” overnight’, and ‘face arrest and beatings, torture and death, while fee-paying big game hunters are encouraged’ (*Poaching -*

*Survival International*). In *The Lion King*, permission would be granted by the royal land-owning lions. In real life, permission is granted or revoked by the governmental powers that be, a nod to the colonial character of wildlife conservation in Africa, and the structural inequalities that position Africans within the global symbolic and political economies thereof (Garland).

Although lions and spotted hyenas eat much of the same prey, the audience is not confronted with the visual of a lion hunt except in one scene from *The Lion King* where Nala, a lion, stalks and chases Pumbaa, a warthog. However, Simba (another lion) stops her and defends Pumbaa, who ends up unscathed. Disconnectedness has been studied with regard to the social production of ignorance within the meat industry, and the morality of eating meat (Broad; Gillespie). In *The Lion King* a similar disconnect is preserved between the audience and the lions' consumption of other animals, which helps preserve the lions' morality in the eyes of the viewer. In one scene, as the trio of hyenas lingers near an oblivious herd of wildebeest, Banzai asks, 'Can't I just pick off one of the little sick ones?' This is, in reality, natural selection by selective predation (Genovart et al.), but in the movie, it was meant to show Banzai as callous. The idea that Banzai would seek defenseless prey alludes to his cowardice, cruelty, and weakness as a predator, and stirs empathy in the viewer for his victim. The prey consumed by the lions, on the other hand, is anonymous and invisible. This creates distance from the act of killing. By this distance, a romanticized portrayal of the lion is maintained that is juxtaposed by the voracious hyena representation. Additionally, Nala shows restraint by her ability to abstain from killing Pumbaa once Simba reasons with her. This is subtle, but markedly different from how hyenas are depicted as insatiable gluttons who cannot abstain from the act of killing. Nala is *moral* enough to hold herself back from killing; she is also *rational* enough to betray her predatory instincts. The noble lion characters are moral and righteous carnivores, while the hyenas juxtapose them as immoral and evil in their needful desire to hunt. Beidelman observes a similar double standard in connection with the spotted hyena and the hare in Kaguru folklore, pointing out the problem of judging 'when ambition is expressed legitimately and when it is seen as subversive to moral authority' (193). He asks, '[w]hat allows some conduct to be judged clever and sharp but justified (as in the case of the Hare) while rather similar conduct is condemned as witchlike and anti-social (as in Hyena's)?' (193). What justifies the lion's consumption of meat

when the hyena's is condemned as immoral? Why is the hyena relegated to subservient scavenging in order to be accepted within the ecosystem of *The Lion Guard*? More plainly, why is the lion more deserving of life and sustenance than the hyena, under the moral frameworks of the Circle of Life?

Whether scavenging or hunting, it seems spotted hyenas cannot win. They are either lazy, slovenly scavengers or they are ruthless, gluttonous, fearsome predators. Though *The Lion Guard*'s 'good' hyenas are good because they are scavengers, the show also introduces new scavengers-as-villains (jackals and vultures). Macdonald questions our hatred of scavenging, pointing out that our human ancestors survived by this method, and also how this trait of hyenas has been distorted and exaggerated. Wilson contextualizes hyenas alongside other scavengers: '[w]hile all scavengers are devalued for their failure to occupy the normative categories of hunter and prey, hyenas, perhaps even more than jackals and vultures, are the quintessential scavengers of the cultural imaginary' (764). Wilson cites a display in the American Museum of Natural History in New York to illustrate this point:

Every animal or group of animals gets a display in which stuffed specimens stand about in attitudes suggestive of feeding, alert survey of the landscape, sleep, or play. Only the hyenas are featured snacking on a scavenged carcass; clearly the essence of hyena that the exhibit seeks to convey requires that we understand it as defined by this particular act. (765)

The hyena's ecological role as a 'cleaner' can and should be emphasized as beneficial to its ecosystem, as should their ability to hunt. According to Gade, spotted hyenas are relatively abundant in parts of the Horn of Africa due in part to their accepted role as garbage and carrion removers, which reduces odours, flies, and rats in towns and cities. A vision of hyenas as lowly scavengers persists, as does the image of the treacherous hunter. Both are true ethologically speaking, but somehow both are exaggerated in a way which ultimately maligns hyenas.

Among the hyenas of *The Lion King* franchise, we witness this contradiction: a stupid, cowardly, thieving, lowly scavenger, yet one who is so capable a threat that the benevolent ruling lions must impose sweeping restrictions on their right (or lack thereof) to occupy shared

space with others. By relegating hyenas to scavenging for them to be ‘good’ members of society, in *The Lion Guard* a hierarchy is assembled which deems that some animals are more worthy of food and life than others. The hyena is to only live on scraps; they are only to eat when all other predators have had their fill. To do otherwise is to selfishly and criminally disrupt the Circle of Life, risking all others. Even the anonymous prey who fall to the lion seem to do so nobly, as a sacrifice to the greater community and to the Circle of Life as a biopolitical system which treats some members of the community as expendable.

### **Threat by numerosity: militarized depictions of hyenas**

In addition to individual displays of wanton gluttony, the hyena collective also is represented in *The Lion King* as an unsustainable plague besieging a bountiful, balanced ecosystem. In one scene, Scar assembles his army of hyenas and sits high on a craggy precipice, a makeshift throne, as an endless, uniform stream of hyenas marches by in lines singing out their loyalty to him in unison. The depiction here, during the ominous song ‘Be Prepared’, is based on a 1935 Nazi propaganda film, ‘Triumph of the Will’, with Scar playing the role of Adolf Hitler in a mock-Nuremberg rally (Mandoki). The formations of the Nazi soldiers and Scar’s hyenas are similar, as is the ‘goose stepping’ gait they perform. The lighting behind Scar as he sings is also intentional, matching the ‘Cathedral of Light’, a main aesthetic feature of Nazi rallies in the 1930s (Mandoki). Whether the Nazi connection is known or not while viewing *The Lion King*, the result is nevertheless imposing, appropriately foreshadowing the murder of The Lion King himself, Mufasa, in the following scene. The hyenas, under Scar’s command, trigger a stampede of wildebeest that trample Mufasa when he races to the gorge to save his son, Simba.

The psychology of being offended or disconcerted by animals assembling in numbers is significant in the context of conservation for several reasons, including the perturbation induced by a nonhuman militia. Succinctly stated, ‘we are offended by animals who are too plentiful’ (Thomas 5). This is especially so in the case of hyenas and other predators who may pose threats to humans even in very small numbers. Quantifying a threat by numerosity creates a sense of alarmed urgency and exacerbates the ‘us or them’ tension between human and nonhuman

animal, especially in the case of a large predator like the hyena who thrives in anthropogenic settings and is therefore routinely visible to humans (Baynes-Rock, ‘Life and Death in the Multispecies Commons’). While *The Lion King* shows a visually impactful example of hyena militarization in Scar’s assembly of his hyena army, the hyena-as-soldier appears elsewhere in entertainment media, for example in the *Wonder Woman* franchise, wherein the villain, ‘The First-Born’, breeds hyenas in an effort to create an army of demigod hyena men to serve him. In the world of *Narnia* created by C.S. Lewis, hyenas are only briefly mentioned, but are known to fight in the evil White Witch’s army. ‘Wargs’ are a breed of wolves in the Tolkien-created *Lord of the Rings* world. Wargs are used by the evil forces of Middle Earth and are ridden as attack animals in battle. Although they are described in the books as wolf-type creatures, Peter Jackson’s depiction of Wargs in the film version of the trilogy closely resembles a spotted hyena.

In addition to these weaponized depictions of hyenas, legally classifying them as if they are too numerous and destructive to be sustainable (‘vermin’, ‘pest’, et cetera.) poses a perceptual challenge for hyena conservationists. Governments’ legal classifications of species is another example of biopolitics, and the hyenas’ various designations determine how their lives are prioritized in different places. In being unprotected in certain areas, they become killable after unwittingly breaching an arbitrary boundary. Anna Gunnthorsdottir found that framing an animal species as endangered affects how the animal is perceived in the context of conservation. The subjective perception of animal attractiveness also substantially increased support for protection. In another segment of the study, participants rated an unattractive animal as more attractive if it was framed as endangered. The hyena is widely perceived as unattractive or ugly (Frank; Pinho et al.) and not labelled as endangered. Rather, the hyena is labelled of ‘least concern’ according to the IUCN’s authority, though populations are decreasing. Presenting the hyena as innumerable in various sweeping scenes of *The Lion King* may lead viewers to believe they are similarly found across Africa, and in fact too plentiful. When considered along with Gunnthorsdottir’s findings, the compounded result may lead the public to decrease support for hyena conservation. Steve Baker analyses conservation and the inseparability of the “real” and

the representational', arguing that representations matter. Ingold suggests that humans shoulder the responsibility of animals' survival or extinction, a role made more complicated by dynamic, culture-specific 'folk taxonomies'.

With charismatic megafauna and well-known keystone species dominating as the faces of conservation causes, and given that people attach value to species in order to morally justify their conservation, how do those less charismatic species, such as those deemed 'vermin', those who are 'villains', break in to deserve protection? Can this be persuasively argued, beyond the ecological justifications which the spotted hyena can rightly claim? Beyond this, can the spotted hyena ever come to have sufficient moral status that they intrinsically merit protection? As animals and animal protection are increasingly politicized in a crowded world, conservation strategies may be framed not necessarily as ensuring the population of the animal (ecocentric), but rather as beneficial for humans (anthropocentric). Hodgetts explains 'animal subjectification' as occurring when:

animals are enrolled through techniques of 'self-government' that shape their mobilities to achieve wider ecosystem goals, and often for the ultimate benefit of human societies. Animals are accorded an ambiguous ethical and political status in such schemes; no longer simply the 'subjects' of conservation schemes justified in their own names, the involved animals are instead simultaneously subjectified through biopolitical techniques of government, and objectified as components in a system valued on anthropocentric terms. (24)

What might this process of 'animal subjectification' spell for hyena futures? If hyenas are increasingly objectified and valued on anthropocentric terms, when already they are portrayed unfavourably in highly visible media, can the balance be tipped in their favour in terms of public perception?



## The 'lion vs. hyena' rivalry

The stories told in *The Lion King* and *The Lion Guard* serve to venerate the noble lion and also to suggest commiseration for them. Despite the lions' strength, power, and beauty, even they may fall victim to the selfish trickery of the hyena. Power must be maintained, hyenas must remain banished, to preserve the balance of the ecosystem and quality of life for members of the kingdom. While contemporary examples purportedly showing a 'rivalry' abound, we should critically consider the origins and ostensible appeal of such a 'rivalry', which anthropomorphizes and oversimplifies the relationship between two species. Such a sweeping generalization does not permit a case-by-case, dynamic, fluid consideration nor any evolution of hyena-lion relations. 'Hyena versus lion' also falsely exempts the human from the dynamic, when in fact humans perpetuate the narrative. Ideas about both species are rife with symbolism that is deeply entrenched in various cultures; with this in mind we must recall that 'conservation ethics at the level of both individual attitudes and social norms have deep and complex psychological and cultural roots' (Hare et al.). One early mention of a symbolic separation of lion and hyena is found in the 1592 play *Midas*: 'I say he is no lion, but a monster; peec'd with the craftiness of the fox, the crueltie of the tyger, the ravening of the woolfe, the dissembling of the Hyena' (Lyly). No lion, but *instead* a monster, a mutual exclusivity that hints at the noble symbolism of the lion, juxtaposed with a 'monster' made up, in part, by the hyena. The lion has long been a noble symbol of regal power. The lion thus occupies a place in the cultural imaginary which starkly contrasts centuries of hyena depictions that essentially antonymize nobility.

Lion versus hyena is a rivalry perpetuated not just in *The Lion King* and animated film, but also in documentaries which purportedly show realities of the natural world. When a blog posted a clip from David Attenborough's *BBC Earth* titled 'Lion Attacked by Hyenas but Saved by Pal' the video caption read: 'A young male lion is attacked by over twenty hyenas, and has a tough go of it, but in the end is saved by the appearance of his pal Tatu. Listen to those hyenas laugh! Nasty creatures, they are'. In the comment section, mentions were made of hyenas as 'vicious thugs' who deserve to be 'taught a lesson' by the lions. *National Geographic* aired 'Eternal Enemies: Lions and Hyenas' with footage of lions and hyenas clashing in 1992, filmed in Botswana. In 2006 the special was released on DVD with section titles including 'Blood Feud of

Hatred’ and ‘Noble Hunters and Lowly Scavengers’. *The Washington Post* published a review of this documentary special, warning the viewer that much of the footage was graphic. In an excerpt from that review, the emotions of the author are reflected:

One young lioness is Motsumi, who isolates herself from the pride to give birth to three cubs as the Jouberts’ camera catches the event. The cubs are playful and endearing, and when they and their mother are attacked by a cobra, we are saddened. Motsumi suffers a strike to the rear leg, resulting in a week of dehydration and blurred vision, her central nervous system impaired. Miraculously, the vulnerable cat isn’t killed by the hyenas who instead tear apart the bodies of her dead cubs.

For a moment, we hate the hyenas. But then we meet the Princess, daughter of the matriarch and sole heiress-apparent having killed her twin sister (a practice of the innately competitive cubs that ensures survival of the fittest). (Brennan)

The IUCN, in their 1998 report, critiques this documentary as contrasting with the reality of spotted hyena social organization (with regard to the ‘Princess’ storyline, which they say is misrepresentative), and also as anthropomorphic: ‘lions and spotted hyenas are depicted as hating each other’ (Mills and Hofer 101). Notions of rivalry even trickle to conservation directly and impact perceptions of hyenas being worthy of study relative other species. I surveyed hyena conservationists and asked, ‘what are the most typical reactions you receive when you introduce yourself as working in hyena conservation?’ Respondents noted reactions that ranged from neutral-negative (incredulous, confused, surprised) to outright negative, including: ‘spotted hyenas are not very appreciated animals and people get surprised and wonder why hyenas and not charismatic carnivores such as lions’ and, ‘people are generally surprised ... and think of *The Lion King*’. A study surveying conservation volunteers in South Africa found that hyenas ‘had a negative image amongst volunteers and were called “ugly” and “annoying” by some due to their perceived image as scavengers rather than “noble” hunters’ (Cousins et al. 1074). Says Glickman, ‘it is one of the great ironies of spotted hyena existence that, over a span of several million years, they have held their own in direct competition with lions, only to lose (what may be their most critical battle) in the court of public esteem’ (504).

## Conclusion

Hyena conservation groups have acknowledged for decades the barrier of negative attitudes about hyenas affecting their work. *The Lion King* especially contemporized and irreversibly popularized beliefs about hyena immorality which can be found dating back thousands of years. Negative attitudes about hyenas persist and are perpetuated through various media, including far-reaching Disney media. Mullan and Marvin explain that representations of animals are not true representations, because animals simply cannot represent themselves to human viewers. Humans define and represent them, and these portrayals reflect our own concerns. Creating and consuming media is not neutral, it is relational because another being is being depicted – and in the case of the nonhuman animal, this is without consent (George and Schatz). Once the association becomes relational, it is simultaneously political, as power dynamics ‘allow one to justify one’s interest over the other that is consumed’ (George and Schatz xvii). Humans are solely accountable for how we narrate nonhumans in our media, and for how those fictions come to impact their welfare and survival. Some species enjoy the privilege of continuous visibility which allows for education opportunities, species awareness, and even direct fundraising. Biopolitics considers the structures and institutions that uphold life through symbolic and material means; for example, when funding is encouraged by school mascot programs.<sup>3</sup> According to Baker, using an animal as a logo assigns value to the animal and catalyses a protective feeling for the beholder, which may trickle into a tangible contribution to conservation. Baker points out that the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), with its panda logo, made a sizeable donation to a prominent panda preserve in China. Returning, with this example in mind, to the constructed ‘lion-hyena rivalry’, the lion wins on popularity of its public image in mascotry; the hyena is notably absent. Though present in films and other media depicting African wildlife and wildlife relations, these portrayals are most often negative.

It is encouraging however to see examples of hyena counternarrative emerging in child-focused media. In the children’s video game ‘Zootopia: Crime Files’, players meet Gertie the spotted hyena. She is described as ‘a slightly hunch-backed hyena with smoky, spotted brown fur and a slicked-back mane that is mostly dyed pink. She wears white and pink headphones around her neck’ (‘Gertie’). Gertie is a neutral character, a computer programmer, and is not a villain

in the game. Interestingly, Gertie is also a vegetarian, which is markedly different from the many other depictions of hyenas in media as meat-crazed gluttons. Janell Cannon's children's book *Pinduli* tells the story of a striped hyena, Pinduli who is teased for her appearance, and later teaches her fellow members of the African savanna that words matter. *Pinduli* won an ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Award, an award 'established to honor books that promote the humane ethic of compassion and respect for all living things' ('Henry Bergh Award'). Another children's book, *Hermie the Laughing Hyena*, tells children, in the author's words, 'the importance of having a cheerful, positive outlook and the healing power of laughter' (Rebhun). In the book, Hermie the Hyena goes to Sadville, trying to make friends. When he makes the king of Sadville laugh, the town is forever changed. Finally, Avril Van der Merwes children's book *I Don't Want to Be a Hyena* tells the story of a hyena who is sad about her reputation. The book summary from the author reads:

She wants to be loved, like Elephant, and admired, like Lion. However, her efforts to turn herself into first an elephant, and then a lion prove humorously unsuccessful. Lion suggests that since Hyena has spots like a leopard, perhaps she could become a leopard instead. This attempt too, meets with comical failure. Far from denigrating her, the other animals affirm her strong hyena qualities, and encourage her to be all that she was born to be, much to the relief and delight of Hyena's pack.

Telling redeeming stories of hyenas to a new generation is a vital step in rehabilitating their image.

While striving for a new conservation ethics which values all nonhuman nature intrinsically, in the interim amending the narrative of the hyena as ecologically reckless is a useful first step towards building empathy for them – or to at least justify protection *until* hyenas are rightfully granted moral consideration. Destabilizing the lion-versus-hyena rivalry may also help with this effort, as the two are constantly narrated in a way which forces competition for charisma. Though scholarship from animal studies and ethics tells us that harming animals is morally significant regardless of conservation status, concerns for individual animals' welfare and traditional conservation objectives are often antithetical (Sekar and Shiller). Quantifying the impacts of popular culture on nonhuman lifeworlds may be difficult, but filmmakers and others who tell stories through representations of nonhumans must nevertheless be mindful and

accountable. Narratives have the potential to cement moral dualisms, notions of good and evil, that are endlessly (re)created and thus, regardless of whether one can trace repercussions to individual animals and their lifeworlds, can be intrinsically harmful as they lay the groundwork for demonizing and rendering killable those animals deemed ‘evil’. Considering the role of humans’ entrenched moral concerns in conservation valuations, new hyena narratives must continue to emerge which take into account the deep psychological and cultural roots of these concerns, and which represent hyenas as rightful members of their ecosystems and of our shared planet.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is focused on the spotted hyena, *Crocuta crocuta*, as content analysis found this species of hyena overrepresented compared to other hyena species. However, hyena stigma is not isolated to the spotted hyena; though popular features of hyena representations are based on the spotted hyena (their ‘laughter’, their external genitalia, etc.) these traits are falsely generalized to other hyena species. Thus, all hyenas, not only spotted hyenas, are vilified by association.

<sup>2</sup> My unpublished master’s thesis discusses local case studies in depth; some of these analyses appear in my chapter in *Gender and Sexuality in Critical Animal Studies* (2021) edited by Amber E. George.

<sup>3</sup> I found not one college in the United States which has a hyena as a mascot, and more than 20 with lions as mascots. Connecting with nonhuman animal mascots can create a sense of community with and responsibility for the animal (DeSantis). Clemson University, whose mascot is a tiger, solicits donations for ‘Tigers Always’, a tiger conservation initiative. On its fundraising page, Clemson supplicates: ‘As Clemson Tigers, we can’t sit back as the few tigers left dwindle down to the point of extinction. We must take a stand ... to protect our beloved mascot’ (‘Tigers United University Consortium’). This is another example, along with WWF’s

emblematic panda, of a species so charismatic that it would deserve lionization – pun intended – as a mascot, and where those who borrow its likeness, to harness its most aspirational qualities, feel compelled to protect this animal as an extension of community identity. Although ostensibly anthropocentric, the result is nevertheless increased awareness and funding for species-specific conservation.

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