“THE BUFFALOES ARE GONE” OR “RETURN: BUFFALO”? – THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE BUFFALO TO INDIGENOUS CREATIVE EXPRESSION

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Abstract / Résumé

While the depletion of the Buffalo has been understood as a contributing factor in the subjugation of plains Indigenous people, what has had less attention is the attack on the integral relationship between the Buffalo and Indigenous people. This relationship, like other relationships between the natural world and Indigenous people, brings together animal and human into a symbiotic relationship that incorporates respect, survival, spirituality and cultural expression. By replacing the value of stories about the Buffalo, we can reinstate this animal and others as sites of learning, which can then result in a revitalization of creativity and literary expression.

Bien que l’épuisement des populations de bisons soit compris comme un facteur contributif de la subjugation des peuples autochtones des plaines, l’attaque sur les liens profonds qui unissent le bison et les peuples autochtones n’a pas bénéficié de la même attention. Comme tous les autres liens entre le monde naturel et les Autochtones, les liens entre le bison et les Autochtones créent une relation symbiotique entre l’animal et l’humain qui intègre le respect, la survie, la spiritualité et l’expression culturelle. En réaffirmant la valeur des histoires au sujet du bison, nous pouvons rétablir cet animal et d’autres comme des sites d’apprentissage qui peuvent ensuite se traduire par une revitalisation de la créativité et de l’expression littéraire.
We first people are people whose elaborate and elegant systems of knowledge were systematically taken apart by those who did not understand them. Our sciences, agriculture, spiritual traditions, and hunting practices were dismantled by government policies and religious organizations. And yet, in places, this knowledge endured in spite of the fact that it was forbidden by those who, because of their own disconnection from nature, did not believe in the complexity of the relationships between humans and the other species by which we live. ...Nor does it pass by me lightly that we have ourselves been likened and compared to animals historically…. Or that George Washington once said we were like wolves, to be driven off our lands to make room for settlement and civilization. (13) -- Linda Hogan, “First People”

As we know, the prairie wolves were not the only species driven off the land to make room for settlement. The prairie bison (hereafter referred to as Buffalo) were also systematically removed from the plains by colonial forces, with dire consequences for Indigenous peoples, as “this animal was considered to be a gift from the Creator intended to provide for the peoples’ needs” (Stonechild 1). In recent times though, the Buffalo has made a figurative return, appearing as part of the phrase we hear in discussions about the need for Indigenous peoples to pursue an education. “Today,” Cree-Saulteaux researcher Blair Stonechild writes in The New Buffalo: The Struggle for Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada, “Elders say that education, rather than the bison, needs to be relied upon for survival” (2).

The concept that “Education Is Our Buffalo” also appears in arguments for higher Indigenous participation in academia. One example is cited in Len Findlay’s March 2001 keynote address to the “History of the Book in Canada” conference, where he recounts witnessing Chief Perry Bellegarde’s fall 1999 speech at the inauguration of the incoming President of the University of Saskatchewan, where he states: “Education is now our Buffalo.” Findlay employs this metaphor, and Bellegarde’s use of it, to deconstruct a popular image and an all-too-familiar narrative: that until recent times, Indigenous people of the plains were seen to share the fate of the Buffalo, “dwindling in numbers, territorially confined, curiosities of the colonial past with no clear role in the potentially postcolonial future” (“Rethinking” 5). This story, however, is not true, as Findlay later points out in his essay. Neither the Buffalo nor Indigenous peoples have faded into extinction; rather, their numbers and presence have continued to increase, and education for Indigenous peoples, as Chief Bellegarde reminds us, can be de-colonized, (re-) employed, and
(re-) made to sustain Aboriginal knowledge systems in contemporary times.

Stonechild, Bellegarde and Findlay’s rhetorical moves here are reminders of how important, and powerful, metaphors, images, and stories are – particularly in relation to history. It’s not as easy as re-telling events, utilizing terms, and proving “facts” and “figures” but requires a nuanced understanding of specific contexts, places, and subjectivities. The ongoing story of Indigenous peoples’ and “education”—particularly considering our history with residential schools, Indian Act policies, academia, and our many examples of critical and creative agency therein—demands this. When narratives are absent of one (or more) parts of the story, they must be re-introduced. We may even find that Indigenous perspectives may never have disappeared in the first place.

This is particularly why when we think of education, we must not fall into an easy (and manipulative) trap of seeing Western education as being the only source of Indigenous sustainability. Simply, “Education is our Buffalo” does not necessarily mean “Western education is our Buffalo.” As scholars such as Marie Battiste and Sakej Henderson (among many others) remind us, a Western education can be fraught with underlying colonial agendas. These scholars maintain that the current system of education strives to promote cognitive imperialism, which thereby denies “Indigenous people access to and participation in the formulation of educational policy, constrains the use and development of Indigenous knowledge and heritage in schools, and confines education to a narrow positivistic scientific view of the world…” (86). I would also include some critical approaches to Indigenous literature within this sphere: namely those critical approaches that do not, at their core, recognize and honor the Indigenous knowledge(s) embedded in stories. Thus, while current education systems and academic projects provide opportunities for Indigenous peoples, it is often at the cost of restricting and devaluing Indigenous thought and belief systems. Undermining this all-too-often primary premise is what I believe the editors of this special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* are attempting to do.

I want to respectfully put forward the claim that, for Indigenous people of the plains, “the Buffalo is also our Education.” Despite lengthy and organized colonial efforts to completely displace and appropriate the Buffalo, this animal is reemerging with an increased population, numbering approximately 230,000 in Canada alone (Savage 54). With a greater physical presence, similarly, the Buffalo is reemerging as a marker of renewed Indigenous cognitive awareness. In light of this double resurgence and enduring bond, learning about the Buffalo and its significance in tribal identity as told through our stories is as important as
Western education for Indigenous peoples’ sustainability. In other words, Linda Hogan’s reference in my epigraph to the endurance of Indigenous knowledge, once applied to knowing and understanding the interrelationship of Indigenous peoples and the Buffalo, reveals how the renewal of that relationship is contributing to a rebirth of Indigenous creative expression. Our stories make us who we are as Indigenous peoples, and the other beings who inhabit our lives and provide us with guidance (if we choose to listen). The critical theories therein need to be recognized and valued as part of a responsible, ethical, and Indigenous-centered critical literary practice.

In order to put the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the animal world in context, I want to return to Hogan and her short essay “First People.” She explains the intricate relationship between Indigenous peoples and animals: “For us, the animals are understood to be our equals. They are still our teachers. They are our helpers and healers. They are our guardians and we have been theirs…. We have deep obligations to them. Without the other animals, we are made less” (12). Indeed, for most Indigenous peoples, the traditional relationship between humans and animals exists within a kinship context (Allen, Weaver, Dunn and Comfort). Survival and Indigenous ways of life relied upon intricate knowledge and respect for the animal inhabitants who shared the land, and this remains true today. Survival does not only mean physical survival, but also our spiritual, emotional and mental well-being. Indigenous literatures often reify, define and honor these responsibilities and relationships between humans, non-humans, and the broader universe.

For plains Indigenous people, respect for the animal world was especially significant in their relationship with the Buffalo – upon which survival depended. As one plains Indigenous person remembers: “The buffalo was part of us, his flesh and blood being absorbed by us until it became our own flesh and blood. Our clothing, our tipis, everything we needed for life came from the buffalo’s body. It was hard to say where the animal ended and the man began” (Lame Deer 269). In plains Indigenous tradition, the Buffalo also serves as a relation who is there to teach the people and provide guidance. In a Cree story, retold by Eleanor Brass, the White Buffalo comes through a dream to a woman who is rejecting her people’s ways in favor of European ways. The Buffalo is furious at her, and keeps her captive in a buffalo corral for two days, “during which time she re-lived her past life and began to feel guilty about ignoring her own Native materials and using those of the White man,” and is thus reminded of who she is as a Cree person (22). We can see this story as a metaphor, in that, while we may use the tools of the ‘White man,’ we can choose to use them to sustain our culture, lan-
The Relationship of the Buffalo to Indigenous Expression

The Buffalo is a protector against the oncoming encroachment of White settlers into Indigenous territory. Stories like this illustrate the importance of the Buffalo, its interconnectedness with Indigenous peoples and the ongoing role in their lives, and chronicle a long-standing relationship that is reified through their continual retelling.

As Europeans moved into the plains, first as explorers, then as settlers, they brought with them what Sakej Henderson calls the “diffusionist myth of emptiness,” which allowed new settlers to feel a sense of entitlement to the region. This related to their perceived Indigenous inhabitants’ ongoing mobility, “lack” of private property and intellectualism, and inevitable disappearance into modern civilization (61). Key to this concept is the elimination or displacement of Indigenous subjectivities, concepts, world views, and particularly stories. Supporting practices and policies of removal and genocide were “the myths of conquest and dominance that turn the land, which was once community, into mere property and the other-than-human persons and Mother Earth herself into simple commodities to be exploited” (Weaver 163). These ideologies promoted a righteous rhetoric and justified reasons to clear the land using whatever means necessary. One of the implications of this move, among many, was a severing of the many bonds between humans and animals.

Prior to colonial settlement and its resulting destruction, the Buffalo’s physical presence on the plains was enormous. Accounts range from 30–60 million animals, ranging across half of the continent, “from the Canadian prairies south to northern Mexico and from the Rocky Mountains east to the Mississippi drainage” (Savage 52). A result of their vast numbers was the physical marking of the land they lived on. According to Métis writer Peter Erasmus, “Deep ruts scored the prairie grass where the buffalo had traveled for centuries in their migrations back and forth across the plains” (71). His description shows the evidence of the longevity of the Buffalo on the plains, and his description of the deep ruts can be seen as the Buffalo’s physical and symbolic marking of its territory. Yet with the encroachment of settlement by European colonizers, the Buffalo’s physical presence was deemed obstructive and redundant by colonizers in the western plains. In two historical accounts of the Buffalo on the plains, both note “how the buffalo acts synecdochically: the buffalo is the prairie; there is nothing but beast and grass through which one must pry, sheering them out of the way” (MacLaren 84, original emphasis). By the end of the slaughter, only a few decades later, the Buffalo numbered in the hundreds. Through the Buffalo’s near elimination, colonial forces were able to transform the environment of the plains,
practicing a sort of ecological imperialism that is well documented (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 76). This, of course, carried huge political and intellectual consequences for Indigenous peoples.

For the most part, this ecocide was justified through story. The disappearances of buffalo and Indigenous people, in fact, were often rhetorically positioned as the same. One published nineteenth-century account by a military man declared that, "Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone" (Faragher v). As found in representations of Indians, a large part of rationalizing the slaughter was the Buffalo's perceived "stupidity," which enabled ease of the hunt. As one writer put it, Buffalo are characterized as "mild, inoffensive and dull...slow to learn from experience, and this lack of intelligence greatly hastened the destruction of the race" (Grinnell 271). The parallels between representations of the buffalo and Indians are endless. Both absolve colonialists of responsibility for the slaughter, lay blame on the inferiority of "lesser" beings, and emphasize the superiority of settler culture.

More insidious, colonial characterizations of the Buffalo sought to displace and replace Indigenous stories relating the animals to teachings of balance and interdependency. Some conservationists and observers even blamed Indigenous peoples themselves for the destruction of animals such as the Buffalo. As one writer put it, "I have yet to learn of an instance wherein an Indian refrained from excessive slaughter of game through motives of economy, or care for the future, or prejudice against wastefulness" (Hornaday 506).

These moves all had rhetorical impacts and real-life implications. Len Findlay illuminates this particular settler attitude during the treaty negotiation process in Canadian western territory:

  For the [government and the settlers] the treaties meant a process of legal extinction of land title to support the physical extinction of the Plains peoples. If Aboriginal people were stupid enough to give away their ancestral lands and rights then too bad. That stupidity was underscored by the crudity of their signing process and the naïve pride with which their leaders regarded and wore their treaty medals.... (“Rethinking” 19)

Thus, according to the grand narrative being constructed, Indigenous peoples and the Buffalo deserved to be systematically and forcibly eliminated from the land.

In addition to their physical presence, Indigenous memories were also obscured in order to solidify claims to the land and stewardship over Indigenous peoples. As Henderson argues, “[t]o strip Indigenous peoples of their heritage and identity, the colonial education and legal
The concept of collective amnesia has left a lasting legacy for Indigenous peoples’ self-awareness and their creative expression. This was manifested in multiple ways, including the imposition of a belief system that severed, disregarded or romanticized ties between Indigenous people and their animal relatives. According to many imposed European beliefs, “Humans were placed at the top of a hierarchy of being that clearly ranked animals in a lower, subordinate position” (Harrod xxii).

One of the most explicit ways in which ideological imperialism succeeded was in the appropriation of the image of the Buffalo, which quickly became the symbol of the “wild” west. The narrative was simple: the Buffalo had to be tamed in order for settlement to occur. Found on packaging, in dime store novels, and posters (sometimes alongside Indians, but not always), the Buffalo became a tokenized remnant of what had to be overcome if the frontier was to be “won.” Sportsmen and conservationists of the late nineteenth century who lamented the decreasing Buffalo population saw it as “the disappearance of both a great hunting target and a living symbol of the glorified West in which brave men repeatedly encountered and conquered elements of a seemingly infinite wilderness” (Shell xv). In settler’s eyes and minds, Buffalos and Indians were reduced to ‘trophies’ and casualties of European dominance.

Lynne Bell discusses the need for this discourse by referencing Chinua Achebe’s contention of the following: “imperial expansion involved not only the occupation of colonies but also the development of the ‘story’ of empire, disseminated in the pages of a colonial library, and enforced in educational, cultural, administrative, and political institutions” (256). The story of the disappearance of the Buffalo (and by association, Indigenous peoples) needed to be entrenched in multiple ways. One way was the visual representation of the disappearing Buffalo. According to I.S. MacLaren, early attempts at representation of the Buffalo were “concerned with symbolizing the exotic in terms that are at once recognizable and recognizably foreign” (81). Furthermore, despite the vast numbers of Buffalo on the plains during these early representations, most visual depictions do not show huge herds of Buffalo, choosing instead to show a solitary Buffalo or a small herd (86).

For example, Paul Kane journeyed west from 1845-48, resulting in many paintings and sketches of Indigenous peoples, including several that feature the Buffalo. One well-known painting is Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo, in the collection of the National Art Gallery of Canada. The piece features two warriors, one with his bow ready to strike and the other
observing, as they chase down a solitary Buffalo, an empty landscape in the background. While it too follows an aesthetically established pattern of depicting a solitary Buffalo rather than a vast herd, it becomes an even more layered example of the creation of a colonial “story.” It is a replica of a European print of two Italians hunting a bull for sport. The composition of the two works are similar: the Buffalo and the bull share an expression of fear, the horses are in the same position, and in the European version, the Italian hunter has his lance ready to strike. What differs is the background. The European print has aspects of civilization, with planted trees and an architectural structure, as opposed to the “emptiness” of the plains in Kane’s painting. Thus, the two representations, placed side by side, take on a similar air of “before and after” portraits of Indigenous people shown to highlight the successes of the civilizing mission set out by colonizers. In effect, the two paintings show the way in which Indigenous narratives of life on the land were (and continue to be) replaced by colonial narratives of conquest and the subsequent imposition of European worldviews on Indigenous land.

Other paintings done of the Buffalo during this time share characteristics of portraits done of Indigenous peoples. Especially popular were those paintings that depict what I shall call the “Last fill-in-appropriate-tribe-here.” For example, during the same period in which Kane was painting the “last” Buffaloes, Quebec artist Antoine Plamondon finished a portrait of Zacharie Vincent, which came to be known as the “last” Huron, “…one of a host of works of the imagination dealing with the allegedly vanishing Indigene..., and has much to tell us about the haunting of the Canadas by the specters of their first peoples at every stage of colonial configuration” (Findlay, “Spectres” 657). According to Findlay, the trope of the Vanishing Indian was of comfort to the settlers heading west while at the same time a reminder of the ghostly presence of Indigenous peoples, wronged by the forces of colonialism:

The Huron remnant is figured as synecdoche for a doomed society and for a holism that will prove no match for modernity’s divided and divisive labor. Settlement and improvement will disperse much of nature’s aura (outside national parks), overcoming its distance and difference, while the Indigene’s otherness is savored most intensely at moments of its most acute endangerment and supreme rarity, as colonized difference splits into memory and décor. (666)

We could just as easily substitute the Buffalo in this passage, where-upon the animal and its virtual disappearance (or confinement to national parks and a handful of nature preserves) also becomes a symbol of the inevitable progress of colonization.
Another example of the “story” of the Buffalo’s inevitable and deserved disappearance is found in scholarly texts published at the turn of the twentieth-century. One such publication is *The Extermination of the American Bison*, published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1889. Published by an institution with a mandate “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men” (Smithsonian) and posturing as an “official” version of anthropology, science and history of America, William Hornaday’s book chronicles actual slaughter and exterminatory practices with deep detail but ignores the “fact” that the Buffalo themselves were not completely eradicated. While this may be a simple oversight (or a prediction), the title acts for more than this. It is a claim of the extinction and the apparent disappearance of the Buffalo that served western domination. It not only serves to inform the world that the “west” is conquered, but that Indigenous peoples, their ways of living, and even their abilities to resist, were over.

Other publications added tragic elements to this inevitable narrative of disappearance. In one such text, titled “The Last of the Buffalo,” published in 1892 by George Grinnell, a nostalgic lament of the complete extinction of the Buffalo adds a melodramatic bent. The closing words of the nineteen-page article are as follows:

> On the great plains is still found the buffalo skull half buried in soil and crumbling to decay. The deep trails once trodden by the marching hosts are grass-grown now, and fast filling up. When these most enduring relics of a vanished race shall have passed away, there will be found, in all the limitless domain once darkened by their feeding herds, not one trace of the American buffalo. (286)

The language in this passage underscores the extinction of both the Buffalo as a species and Indigenous peoples as a presence in the west. The skull in the act of decay suggests a sense of loss, but of necessary decomposition. A “limitless domain once darkened” suggests that light has arrived in the west in the form of Euro-American civilization in order to wipe out the presence of the “others.”

Perhaps the most overt arena for this representation of tragedy, however, was in mainstream literature. See the Carl Sandberg poem “Buffalo Dusk,” published in 1920:

> The buffaloes are gone.  
> And those who saw the buffaloes are gone.  
> Those who saw the buffaloes by thousands and how they pawed the prairie sod into dust with their hoofs, their great heads down pawing on in a great pageant of dusk,
Those who saw the buffaloes are gone.
And the buffaloes are gone. (235)

While Sandburg is likely sincere, the poem’s nostalgic undertone contributes to a sense of loss – something exotic and relegated to the past. The authoritative left lines are full of malaise and melancholy (underlined by the repetition of “gone”), while the descriptions of beauty and strength of the buffalo are de-emphasized (with even an absence of syntax and rhythm) to the lines to the right. As expected, the contextual history of this loss, the implications, and the perpetrators, is sorely absent. It also suggests that “those who saw the buffaloes”—Indigenous peoples—have disappeared as well, when this (as I have pointed out) is simply untrue in both cases.

As a result of the assaults on Indigenous memory and knowledge systems, particular traditional teachings essential to understanding relationships in ecology and nature, have been disrupted. A sense of metaphorical dislocation can come about as a result of “cultural denigration” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 75). Specifically, there has been both a physical and psychic distancing between modern Indigenous consciousness and the animal world. As Hogan points out, “In this world, animals reside primarily inside human constructs: parks, zoos, fences, even inside the human mind as we reimagine and totemize them” (“First Peoples” 17). Indigenous peoples are not immune to the imposition of this world view, as the Buffalo largely remains fenced and corralled out of sight, resulting in a disconnect between our selves and the animal world.

Many Indigenous people find themselves in this position, but it’s reductive and simplistic to call this evidence of “assimilation.” As Leroy Littlebear has identified, “No one has a pure world view that is 100 percent Indigenous or Eurocentric; rather, everyone has an integrated mind, a fluxing and ambidextrous consciousness; a precolonized consciousness that flows into a colonized consciousness and back again” (85). Indigenous peoples today continually negotiate the space between Indigenous and western world views; however, when certain valuable and sacred traditions are obscured by colonial legacies, gaps in that consciousness arise. And for Indigenous peoples, education, when understood as becoming familiar with our stories of our relationships with the animal world, can fill in those gaps. Pueblo educator Gregory Cajete outlines this process: “There is a shared body of understanding among many Indigenous peoples that education is really about helping an individual find his or her face, which means finding out who you are, where you come from, and your unique character” (183). It is within our stories about the beings of this world as our teachers that we can find the path to our “faces” as Indigenous people.
The relationship between the animal world and the human world provides a creative impetus that places Indigenous peoples’ paths alongside that of the Buffalo, recreating that symbiotic, age-old relationship. Cajete posits that this positioning can inspire artists and others who create: “Being torn between those two ways of living and looking at life is a place of great confusion, but it can also be a place of great compassion and creativity” (189). Indigenous positioning of ideas, sense of self, and location all result in the creation of a space where creativity and agency can be found: “Indigenous thinkers show the way by dramatizing the productivity of double consciousness: to be at once inside and outside is to gain critical relation to dominant ways of doing and thinking” (Battiste et al. 16). It is precisely from this concept of shifting location, from loss to gain, death to renewal, from history to contemporary (and back again), that I wish to examine the context of the Buffalo’s place in Indigenous creative expression. In other words, the Buffalo teaches us about the cycle of retreat and re-emergence that we find in ourselves as Indigenous artists and peoples.

If we begin with our own stories, we renew our own subjectivities and world views. Plains Indigenous stories say that “the buffalo originated and emerged from underground. Some of the northern Plains groups believed that the buffalo emerged from beneath a lake” (Verbicky-Todd 198). The stories speak to our close relationship and sense of kinship to these animals. In addition, some stories say the Buffalo emerged every spring, as a sign of the renewal of life. Vine Deloria, Jr., in his work God Is Red, refers to Buffalo Gap in the Black Hills as marking “the location where the buffalo emerged each spring to begin the ceremonial year of the Plains Indians” (277). Other stories speak of “the temporary disappearance of the buffalo from the earth at one time, and their retrieval from underground or a cave” (Verbicky-Todd 203). These patterns of emergence and retreat, re-emergence and renewal, provide valuable teachings.

While unarguably the slaughter of the Buffalo was the main cause for its relative “disappearance,” other stories reveal reasons why the Buffalo’s population dwindled after European contact on the plains. Indigenous stories tell us that when European encroachment began impacting their world, some Buffalo responded by choosing to leave. Neal McLeod, in his work Cree Narrative Memory, shares stories from his great grandfather, Peter Vandal, where he “described the retreat of the buffalo into the ground as kotâwîwak (‘they enter into the ground’). He also described the buffalo as ‘drowning themselves’ (e-mistâpâwēhisocik) in Redberry Lake (mihkomin sâkahikan). He did not see this happen, but he was raised by people who had” (25). McLeod discusses other be-
ings, both animal and spiritual, who also retreated from the land “when the forces of colonialism exerted their full weight” (29). Beyond the interdependency that existed between plains Indigenous peoples and the Buffalo, animal-beings provided a marker of well-being in the world for Indigenous peoples. The fact that the Buffalo’s population is growing today points toward the potential for well-being for us as well. By engaging in a cycle of retreat and re-emergence, the Buffalo’s agency in the acts of leaving and returning can clear space for a spirit of renewal for plains Indigenous people.

One location for these (re-)positionings is within Indigenous literature. It is in these critical and agent spaces that such teachings and acts of beautiful resistance can be found. It is therefore crucial that scholars consider the relationship between traditional and sustainable Indigenous life practices and creativity. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice asserts that the uncovering of this interconnectedness shows “how the survival of Indigenous peoples is strengthened by the literature we produce and the critical lenses through which we view them” (149). Of particular interest, and what many scholars miss, are the intricate interrelationships offered by Native writers, and how these descriptions actualize and inscribe ongoing teachings regarding the natural world. As Clifford Trafzer writes, “Native American narratives…offer a way of knowing place and time, the relationship of humans to the larger community” (79). Storytelling and the oral tradition can supply both structural and thematic influences, with the story itself being seen as containing knowledge essential for identity, location, and self-awareness (Hogan, “First Peoples” 9).

Countering the established myths of disappearance, both for the Buffalo and the trope of the Vanishing Indian, are the efforts made by Indigenous artists who insist on presenting works that represent selfhood in close relationship with the natural world: “When we assert our own meanings and philosophies of representation, we render the divisions irrelevant, and maintain our Aboriginal right to name ourselves” (Todd 75). These moves towards re-emergence, found in creative and critical works by Native writers, renews and reasserts a sacred Buffalo teaching practice. Writers and artists “construct a way of seeing the buffalo that…details the representational myopia of centuries of polarized history. That cultural myopia is the imperial gaze that would read Native representations, like Native lands, as property in the public domain” (Moore 75).

Specific works from writers such as James Welch, Linda Hogan and filmmaker Dana Claxton reflect the interrelationship between humans and the Buffalo. Welch’s historical novel *Fools Crow* presents a world
informed by Blackfeet cosmology and language, where a people’s relationship with the “blackhorns” (or Buffalo) has sustained them for generations, and for whom great change is near. The title character is a man who “is part of a continuum of connections between people, animals, mountains, stars, cycles of seasons and ceremonies stretching into the mythic past” (Sands 83). At the end of the novel, Fools Crow travels to a different world where he is given the gift of foresight. Through an image painted on a skin by the deity Feather Woman, he is able to see what the future holds for him and his people:

He searched around the Sweet Grass Hills, the Yellow River, the River-where-the-shield-floated-away, Snake Butte and Round Butte. But he did not find the blackhorns. He looked along the Breaks north of the Big River and he looked to the country of the Hard Gooseneck and the White Grass Butte, the Meat Strings. But there were no blackhorns…. It was as if the earth had swallowed up the animals. Where once there were rivers of dark blackhorns, now there were none. (356)

It is a terrible shock to him, as he also sees the coming soldiers, starvation and death. The images fade and he experiences despair.

However, the skin also reveals another vision: Blackfeet children attending residential school, hemmed in by a fence. While seemingly trapped in a site of indoctrination, the children are revealed to be resilient. Feather Woman assures Fools Crow that these children “will know the way it was. The stories will be handed down, and they will see their people were proud and lived in accordance with the Below Ones, the Underwater People – and the Above Ones” (360). Stories are reinforced as sites of resistance, but also as sites where knowledge of the Blackfeet way of life will remain and be available.

Welch ends the novel with a potential prophecy of the Buffalo’s return to the people. As Fools Crow and his family prepare for the difficulties awaiting them, out away from their camp “rivers of great animals moved. Their backs were dark with rain and the rain gathered and trickled down their shaggy heads. Some grazed, some slept. Some had begun to molt. Their dark horns glistened in the rain as they stood guard over the sleeping calves. The blackhorns had returned and, all around, it was as it should be” (390-391). All of the actions of the Buffaloes in this passage suggest cycles of movement, life, and beauty. The central question one must ask is: Is this in another world, or another time? Welch does not make this clear to us, but the last line, “it was as it should be,” gestures to the possibility of hope and renewal, despite times of darkness.

The Buffalo in Linda Hogan’s poem “Return: Buffalo” begins as a
marker of the impact of the Buffalo slaughter on Indigenous peoples. It manifests as a scar on the narrator's heart and as "a brother / who heard the bellowing cry of sacred hills / when nothing was there / but stories and rocks. / It was what the ghost dancers heard / in their dream / of bringing buffalo down from the sky / as if song and prayer / were paths life would follow back / to land" (310-1). But by evoking the ghost dance, Hogan opens up possibilities for the Buffalo's significance.

Most scholars see the ghost dance prophecy as a promise of pre-European plentifulness, embodied by the return of deceased relatives and the Buffalo itself if the dance's protocols were followed (Andersson 54). Sakej Henderson asserts that it was actually "a sustained vision of how to resist colonization" (57). He provides an alternative view of what the Ghost Dance meant: "It was a vision of how to release all the spirits contained in the old ceremonies and rites. The dance released these contained spirits or forces back into the deep caves of Mother Earth, where they would be immune from colonizers' strategies and techniques. Their efforts were a noble sacrifice for future generations" (57-58). In her poem, Hogan's lone surviving Buffalo is a metaphor – evidence that spirits and teachings will also survive, emerging out of the earth when the time is right: "the dance would allow the spiritual teachings to renew the ecology, and eventually the forces of the ecology would forge a traditional consciousness of the following generations" (58). While scarred, the Buffalo's survival mirrors that of Indigenous people, who are also marked but still alive. As one critic points out, "The buffalo's present return is a final marker of colonial impotence, of a failure of American exceptionalism, of the deluded impossibility of the five-hundred-year project to 'vanish' the Indian" (Moore 70-71). In this way, the Buffalo embodies the struggle against the forces of colonialism, colonialism's subsequent failure to eradicate and erase Indigenous presence from the land, and the return of both Indigenous physical presence and creative consciousness.

McLeod reminds us that it is within our spiritual narratives that we find who we are as Indigenous peoples. As he writes, "[t]he narratives also point to relationships between humans and other beings, and to the possibilities of radically re-imagining constructed social spaces" (98). I would argue that Indigenous creative expression contributes to that effort. It is not just the written or artistic page where this creativity can be found; works done in new media are another location where Indigenous creators are "creating animating and animated spaces" (Battiste et al 23). One example of where this is found is in Dana Claxton's short film Buffalo Bone China.

Buffalo Bone China is both a political and creative narrative, with
Claxton engaging her own family history and tradition, that of the Plains Lakota, and her own experiences and ideas surrounding the Buffalo. Her work can be included alongside those artists whose works are historical engagements where “political intention and interrogation are entwined in an exploration of the very aesthetic representation and language that have shaped these artists’ formations” (Gagnon 35). Claxton’s work does exactly that: engage with the past act of the Buffalo slaughter and the use of its bones in the making of fine bone china. According to Townsend-Gault, the film “shows how a material transformation—food supply to luxury item (the bone china dinner service was an elegant by-product of the extermination of the buffalo)—was really genocide. In the work, the buffalo pounding across the prairie to the clash of symbols serves as a metaphor for destruction” (44). And while destruction of the vast herds is part of the piece, there is also a teasing web of anti-colonial connections to practices around consumption, greed and culpable gentility.

Yet Claxton’s piece moves past the lament of destruction and assignment of blame to a location of Indigenous strength and mobility from past to present. The film, for example, crucially opens with a dedication to “the Buffalo People,” with no positioning of these people exclusively in the past. In fact, these words can be construed as an affirmation of the Buffalo Peoples’ continued presence and Claxton’s own location of her identity. Additionally, the music is of a low-pitched traditional singer’s voice, with images of multiple (and seemingly countless) Buffalo running across the plains. The image of the herd stampeding toward a static camera almost completely fills the frame, and is repeated throughout the film, representing the continuation and the cycle of life that is part of the Buffalo culture. This theme is also present in the shots that shift between the seasons: of herds charging through snow and in summer. Slow motion is used as a technique to denote the challenges and setbacks that the animal has experienced as a result of colonization. When the hunter (and his gun) is finally seen taking a shot and killing one of the animals, the music shifts to percussion, yet the singing and drums remain in the background, obscured but not completely overpowered.

The next sequence in the film shows the fate of many Buffalo; instead of sustaining and being sustained by Indigenous peoples, their bones become fodder for the manufacturing of a quintessential symbol of “civilized” European colonialism: fine bone china dinner service with gilt edges. The image of a Buffalo skull is occasionally transposed over the china service, as if to serve as a reminder of the price paid for the existence of these dishes. A shirtless warrior appears, crying out in grief.
However, the film shifts again, this time showing hands running over the china, as if reclaiming the Buffalo’s spirit still within the physical object—an act of resistance. Finally, the film ends with the modern warrior, walking towards the camera with a confident stride and strong gaze, as though emboldened by the Buffalo’s spirit. He releases himself from the wrought iron gates of colonization, walks past the camera’s gaze, out of sight (and site), and into an uncertain future.

Claxton finishes the film with the following text: “and as you walk back from the mountain. Where all is lush and green. My great friend, Buffalo, I walk with you forever.” The fates of plains Indigenous peoples and Buffalo are forever linked, but not simply in extinction and destruction, despite colonization’s best efforts, both actual and “storied.” Instead, plains Indigenous people and the Buffalo are linked in a cycle of death and life and retreat and re-emergence.

In her aforementioned essay “First People,” Hogan refers to Alex White Plume, a Lakota who works towards the restoration of the Buffalo on reservations. He says, “that as the buffalo were returning...[t]he people, too, returned to the traditions, stories and the language” (18). Others have also remarked on the symbiotic relationship between the Buffalo and Indigenous people in the context of continued survival and renewal. Vine Deloria, Jr. states: “The Plains were and are a covenant between humans and bison. Our bones go back to the ground to become the dust that nourishes the grasses that feed the buffalo” (qtd. in Matthews 159). Just as Indigenous bones nourish the Buffalo, its presence nourishes Indigenous thought and creativity and continued life on this land.

Battiste asserts that, “We are all virtually new and continuing learners. Indigenous people must continue to learn from our Elders, cultural leaders, and others about knowledge not cultivated in schools and universities” (62). One of the teachings which deserves more attention in literary circles is the role of Indigenous peoples’ relationship with the animal world, and specifically for plains people, the Buffalo. Having a strong understanding of how the Buffalo’s presence sustained us in the past and how it can continue to do so into the future is integral to plains Indigenous expression. Western education practices do have value for Indigenous peoples, and education can continue to be seen as our Buffalo, but not to the exclusion of the Buffalo’s role as our educator. In this way, the Buffalo can be seen as a guide between the two worlds referred to by Cajete and Littlebear. We must re-envision “concepts of humanities and creativity as performance or doing or living. Action brings humanity and creativity to life, and doing and being turn life into knowledge and wisdom. They perform an animated and animating curriculum
that can educate us all, if we allow it to” (Battiste et al 18). The Buffalo’s role as educator should not be exclusive to Indigenous peoples, and thus the Buffalo’s teachings can have an important influence on non-Indigenous peoples to have a new understanding of the land they inhabit and their place on it. The Buffalo’s survival and reemergence in population despite near extinction can be seen as a symbol of hope and renewal, expressed through our stories.

An old Lakota ghost dance song foretells the return of the Buffalo to the plains. Perhaps now is this time, when the Buffalo have returned, and now it is time for us to listen to the stories that teach us our worldview, hold our Indigenous knowledge, and articulate our Indigenous theory:

The whole world is coming,
A nation is coming, a nation is coming,
The eagle has brought the message to the tribe,
The father says so, the father says so.
Over the whole earth they are coming.
The buffalo are coming, the buffalo are coming,
The crow has brought the message to the tribe,
The father says so, the father says so. (Andersson 60)

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