Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison

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Abstract

This dissertation challenges settler-colonial ways of knowing, which attempt to decontextualize, instrumentalize, and isolate beings into taxonomies. It offers as an alternative, a multi-valent approach to understanding plains bison, beings that were strategically extirpated in a genocidal campaign waged by American and Canadian governments against Indigenous peoples. Weaving together discursive writing, storytelling, intermedia artworks, and community-based relational practice, Wilson has produced an unconventional dissertation that conveys the multi-epistemic approach required to understand settlers’ past, present, and decolonized future with bison. These varied approaches are employed to address Wilson’s key research question: How does the patriarchal legacy of settler colonialism affect interspecies relations, and how might we envision new ways of doing and being? She addresses this question in three sections. Part 1 narratively discusses works from Wilson’s thesis exhibition Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison at the McIntosh Gallery (2021) and her contribution to the GardenShip and State exhibition at Museum London (2021-2022). This section explores the works in these exhibitions through their vital materiality and the methodology of their creation. Part 2 combines audio and written storytelling to layer narratives, theory, and criticism into illustrative vignettes. These vignettes take a creative and critical approach to archival records to trace the forced migration of specific bison, whose descendants populate almost all the plains bison herds in the North American conservation system. Extensive footnotes accompany the main narrative text; within these sub-texts, Wilson explores the theories and concepts enacted in the narratives. Part 3 of this dissertation documents Wilson’s thesis exhibition, its coverage in local media, and her contributions to the GardenShip and State exhibition as part of the larger body of her thesis work. Part 4 documents how she relationally developed and delivered this dissertation’s findings to communities beyond the academy.

This dissertation and the connected artworks reflect Wilson’s process of confronting and attempting to unlearn the reductive and isolating taxonomical perspectives that arise from colonialism’s continuing legacy. They suggest ways of knowing through relationships and manifest what happens when we critically reconsider received facts with care, attention, and time. While bison are the centre of this text, Wilson’s multi-valent methodology enacts an enmeshed way of knowing these more-than-human beings and our world.
Keywords
bison, decolonization, fictocriticism, inter-media art, Parks Canada, settler, colonialism, conservation, new materialism, more-than-human, community, contemporary art, visual art, media art, social practice, socially engaged art, speculative futures, textile, mapping

Summary for Lay Audience
This dissertation invites readers to critically reconsider the Western understanding of bison promoted through scientific, historical, and taxidermic representations. Wilson offers an entry point to multiple, alternative ways of knowing bison through inter-media artworks, narratives, and critical writing. These different strategies weave a web of imaginative, empathetic, and subjective experiences that encourage the reader to recognize their own place in histories of ecological-colonialism, Indigenous expulsion, and genocide and in relation to the more-than-human world.
Acknowledgments

To my daughter Asa,

My relationship with bison began when I was mourning the loss of a pregnancy, and the last time I was with them, your life had just taken tenuous hold in my womb. Motherhood, in all its joyous and devastating intensity, suffuses every aspect of my work with bison; partly because this is the subjectivity I work from now and partly because I have the responsibility of showing you how to live ethically as a settler, an uninvited guest, on this stolen Land. I have made work about past harms that infect our present moment, the Western ways of knowing that keep us from our more-than-human kin, and a potential future in which bison’s bodies on the Land is a sign of the resurgence of Indigenous People’s stewardship. Thank you for being with me on this journey, and I hope when you read this, we are still on it together.

We always try and engage in practices of gratitude, you, and me, so I hope you will join me in offering up thanks as you read this.

I must begin by expressing my gratitude for the Land that supported me in this work; first, in Wagiiwing, also known as Riding Mountain National Park (RMNP), where I first met bison. I must acknowledge that RMNP was founded on the violent expulsion of the Keeseekowenin First Nation; I want to acknowledge the First Nations from Treaties 2, 4 and 1 that continue to work with Parks Canada in Riding Mountain National Park despite this abhorrent history.

I do not know where I would be without the time I spent watching and listening to the bison in Wagiiwing. I feel deep gratitude to the cows and calves that allowed me to sit with them. I hope my work does justice to all I have learned from those bison, their ancestors, and kin.

I am fortunate to write this acknowledgement at my kitchen table in our home on the banks of the Deshkan Ziibi or Antler River, in London, Ontario. This River, which runs through the Western University campus, provides water for several First Nations whose traditional territories I am now on. Among them are Chippewa of the Thames and Oneida First Nations, both of whom have not had safe drinking water for over a generation. So, while I acknowledge that I am on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Attawandaron peoples, I must also acknowledge that every time I drink the water here in London, Ontario it is but one example of how I am participating in and benefiting from colonial violence. We will all continue to do so until Indigenous peoples’ who live in these territories, on Turtle Island, and worldwide regain their sovereignty, self-government, and control over all their ancestral territories.

These two places, Wagiiwing and the banks of the Deshkan Ziibi have sustained my body and mind, they have been my teacher, and for that, I am grateful.

Chi miigwech, Mahsi Cho, Nya•wêňha, and kinanâskomitin, to the Anishinabe, Dënësųłinë, Seneca, and Nêhiyaw teachers and elders who guided me. Some I have known only through their writings and recordings. Others have given their time and energy, and so to Les Campbell, Laura
Brandon, Julia Brandon, Maureen Two-Voice, KC Adams, Dan and Mary Lou Smoke, Jeff Thomas, Chloe Dragon-Smith, and Robert Grandjambe I want to express my deep gratitude.

Speaking to biologists with a deep love of the Land has given me access to understanding that would have otherwise eluded me. The openness and generosity of Ken Kingdom, Wes Olson, Pat Rousseau, and Celes Davar was a true blessing, and I will be forever grateful for their friendship. Over coffee in a small café in Wagiiwing I met a young wildlife biologist with whom I felt an instant bond. Christina Prokopenko and I have since collaborated and commiserated as we worked through our respective Ph.D. dissertations. I want to thank her for lending her data and voice to my research-creation.

I want to thank my committee members, David Merritt and Susan Knabe, for supporting my unconventional approach to dissertation work, pushing me, and sticking with the process through a maternity leave and a global pandemic. I am so grateful to my supervisor Patrick Mahon who has not only been instrumental in my doctoral research but who has also opened doors that have profoundly impacted my professional trajectory. He believes deeply in mentorship, and like so many others, I have greatly benefited from his generous spirit.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Manitoba Arts Council Learn Scholarship, the SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, the David Magee Scholarship in Visual Arts, and numerous funding opportunities from the University of Western Ontario. I must also acknowledge the City of London Childcare Subsidy, without which I would not have been able to complete my studies.

Finally, I want to return to my family, to you Asa, and to my partner Angus Cruikshank who has supported me in every possible way. The day I met Angus was the day I started believing I could be the person I wanted to be. He has not stopped inspiring me to meet every challenge ever since.

Though my name alone is on this dissertation, a community of beings, human and more-than-human, made it possible. And to all those named and unnamed, I offer you my sincere and enduring thanks.
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Preface

I can remember two comments dropped on me, like pebbles into the lively pond of my mind. Their ripples are still diffracting and undulating through my practice, research, and life.

The first was at my MFA thesis defense when Cedric Bomford, a member of my committee, asked why, if I cared about animals' agency and lived reality, I was creating representational works about these relationships and not making works involving those relationships. I felt frustration and resentment arising in me, recognizing that I had not been challenged in this way earlier. Now, six years, but also what feels like a lifetime, later, I realize that answering the question “how should I make work in relationship with the more-than-human?” cannot fit within an academic program's spatial or temporal confines because the relational ethics of the answer are ever shifting. It is my contention that the artworks contained in my thesis exhibition, *Remnants, Outlaws and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison* at the McIntosh Gallery (2021) and my contribution to the *GardenShip and State* exhibition at museum London (2021-2022), enact the *asking* of this question.

The second comment came from my Ph.D. supervisor, Patrick Mahon, who asked early in my dissertation work if it was possible to make vital work from a place of ‘innocence.’ At the time, we were discussing the use of animal bodies in my practice. I was, and largely continue to be, a committed vegan. I realize now how this comment rippled through my thoughts and decisions for many years. Patrick was pointing out that I was falling into the trap of making work about but not with other beings. I knew that I did not want to instrumentalize and objectify the lives and bodies of others, and I thought I could make work from an untainted position. I wonder now if that is one of the failures of the dogmatic veganism I often see practiced by settlers. By focusing on the options that do not overtly harm other animals, we avoid wrestling with the many other ethically sticky, murky relationships inherent to our positions as humans. As Donna Haraway argues, there is no opting out of harm “in a multiple and connected world,” so we must “become worldly and respond” (*When Species Meet* 41). By embracing *materials* that implicate me in my art practice – that make me uncomfortable, that I name and acknowledge – I have opened my work to the agency and histories of those materials. I conscript such lively materials to convey my intentions, but that is not to say they do not implicitly manifest agency in their own more-
than-human way. On the contrary, my material research intentionally embraces and highlights how these actors resist my agency, thus making clear their own agency, complete with potentialities and failures.

The inter-media artworks that comprise my thesis work make palpable what Jane Bennett calls ‘vibrant matter.’ I have found fellow feeling with Bennett’s challenge to practice a careful and observed form of anthropomorphism to reveal the latent vitality in the world around us. Like her, however, I fear that despite my good intentions, I will arrive at what Bruno Latour calls a ventriloquist’s relationship with the non-human-world, co-opting its vitality into an anthropocentric epistemological enterprise. This tension between ‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking with’ is one I continually navigate. My work is most successful when predicated on deep listening and empathy for the non-human other. For example, in Fight or Flight in Part Two of this dissertation, I base my narrative on a combination of primary source observation of their capture by Buffalo Jones and the understanding of bison relationships shared by writer and former bison warden Wes Olson. From this research, I combined my own embodied empathy with an imaginative interpretation of bison sensual experiences, which are strikingly different from an anthropocentric one. Alternatively, I see success in my groping for ‘speaking with’ in works where I am responsive to the more-than-humans needs (i.e. Speculative Bison Futures), our relationship, and how the more-than-human resists my intentions. These potentialities for productive failure, instanced in my creation of bone-white ink instead of my intended bone-black ink in the work bone rick, come when I opt to engage with lively materials in their rawest form instead of commercially available processed materials.

I begin my discussion of posthumanism and vital materiality with Bennet and Latour because the Anglo-European philosophical tradition was my entry point into this worldview. It would be easy to accept this entry point as natural in a white supremacist settler society. However, it is important to me to acknowledge that posthumanism’s attention to subjectivity often neglects to foreground its foundation in a specifically Anglo-European nature/culture dichotomy, one that is neither natural nor universal. Many Indigenous scholars articulate non-hierarchical imbricated understandings of the more-than-human rooted in their own specific ontological traditions. For example, Cree poet and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt asserts that Indigenous cosmologies envision “non-speciesist and interdependent models of animality” that are part of their geopolitical present
The silence on these epistemologies, or even worse, Bennett’s insinuation that they belong to a premodern animism, exposes the white-supremacist blind spots that haunt posthumanism (Sundberg 37). I am very conscious of the limitations of the privileged, settler perspective which manifests in “the failure to grasp that another community – with a different intellectual history, values, political and social structure, and knowledge system – [can] experience a different mode of knowing and relating to the world and its nonhuman beings” (Taschereau Mamers 3).

Feminist political ecologist Juanita Sundberg recognizes posthumanism’s tendencies to “reproduce colonial ways of knowing and being by enacting universalizing claims and, consequently, further subordinating other ontologies” (34). Sundberg calls on theorists to take up decolonial scholarship by enacting what Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen calls ‘multiepistemic literacy,’ where multiple epistemic worlds are understood in dialogue (34). Sundberg succinctly lays out three steps toward posthumanist, decolonial scholarship:

1. **Locating the self** which identifies our body-knowledge and confronts the colonizer who lurks within (39).

2. **Learning to learn**, not to extract segments of knowledge and enclose other epistemologies but to practice learning as an ongoing social, participatory process of reciprocity (40).

3. **Walking with**, which requires serious “engagement with Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies” (40). ‘Walking with’ must be practiced with a humility “that treats Indigenous people as political subjects – rather than objects of research” (40). Following Indigenous protocols, principles, and methodologies is essential to walking with (40).

While I have not found myself to be a perfect practitioner of these steps, I look to them to guide the interconnected paths of my research, creative practice, and personal relationships.

Artistic practice, at its best, is a groping towards apprehension while acknowledging that we will never bridge the gap between the incomprehensible and complete understanding. Each work I present in the subsequent pages represents a node in my journey toward apprehending the vital materiality of bison, and simultaneously, the agency of the materials I work with. They are
pieces, and each of the pieces matter, but they do not represent a final arrival at demystification. The knowledge here is not, as Haraway warns us, a thing to be mastered (a closed dialectic) but an actor or agent to be engaged (Haraway 1988, 586). I am laying this out as candidly as possible, knowing that the strictures of a Ph.D. dissertation demands that my deliverables are not “theoretical propositions, unfinished case studies or works in progress” (“Regulations for Ph.D. Students”). Nonetheless, I believe an arrival at a completed course of knowing is an illusion that forecloses the type of curiosity and humility required to be responsive in a vibrant more-than-human world. Understanding bison and their material, symbolic, and discursive relationships is a journey without end.
Settler-colonial ways of knowing attempt to decontextualize, quantify, and isolate beings into taxonomies. These ontological strategies have resulted in an exploitive relationship to the world because it frames humans as sentient masters surrounded by inert resources. These deeply rooted epistemologies led to the decimation of the bison in the late 19th century and the many ill-fated conservation schemes that followed. As a settler, I believe that relational feminist and decolonial frameworks can provide pathways to re-storying the past, recognizing our imbricated kinship with the more-than-human, and addressing our current moment of cultural and ecological peril. In my discursive and art practice I attempt to walk this path, moving through the world in a more just way.

This dissertation employs three methodologies for understanding and conveying the story of bison destruction, control, and rematriation in Canadian and US conservation systems. The first avenue is through visual and audio works discussed in Part 1 and catalogued in Part 3: Thesis Exhibition and Related Programs and Outcomes. The second is through fictocritical narrative writing, contained in Part 2. The third is relationally as conveyed in the varied community engaged projects catalogued in Part 4: An Appendix of Other Projects. The physical and discursive research-creation projects embrace knowing bison through braided stories of their past, present, and future. They attune an audience to the bison’s relationships with one another, humans, and the Land. Both re-story received historical facts and data in affective embodied ways, opening up the empathetic imaginations of an audience. The artwork discussed in Part 1 and the writing in Part 2 represent a single moment in an ongoing, expansive, iterative process. As presented in this dissertation, knowing is meant to be understood and experienced through relationships, and therefore it is an unending and forever changing creative investigation.

Part 1

This section narratively discusses works from my thesis exhibition Remnants, Outlaws and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison at the McIntosh Gallery and Forced Migration, my contribution to the GardenShip and State exhibition at Museum London, which is integral to my broader thesis work. This section explores these works in relation to their vital materiality and the methodology of their creation. The inter-media artworks documented in Part 1 of this
dissertation are organized under the headings “beads,” “bones,” “clay,” “flesh,” “thread,” and “moths.” I have chosen this structure because, in these artworks, beads, bones, clay, flesh, thread, and bugs do the double work of representing and carrying with them their own liveliness.

Part 2

In Part 2, I transpose audio stories from the inter-media artwork, Forced Migration, as written texts. These expanded versions of the audio component exploit the norms of academic prose to enact layered writing back at 'the archive' that facilitates so much violence.¹ This work of fictocriticism layers narrative, theory, and criticism into illustrative vignettes. I play with two narrative voices in each of the eight sections, using different fonts and footnotes to indicate their distinct registers.

Considered altogether, Part 2 is an embodied, speculative history of a familial line of bison. It begins in "Alloway," with the capture of five bison calves in 1873 and 1874 in what is now known as Saskatchewan and follows their translocation to an estate in Winnipeg. Next, "Bedson" recounts the sale of the growing herd to Samuel Bedson in 1880 and the herd’s confinement at Stoney Mountain Penitentiary. In "Fight or Flight," and "Buffalo Jones," the narrative shifts to the capture of the last bison on the Southern plains by Charles Jesse Buffalo Jones in 1887, 1888, and 1889. In "Buffalo Jones," we learn how Bedson's bison were united with their southern brethren through a sale and transfer to Jones’ ranch in 1888, and in “Fight or Flight,” I empathetically imagine what the capture of wild bison would have been like from their perspective. In "Search for Facts," I compare the racially coded narratives around bison calf capture as I follow settler and Pend d'Oreille histories of bison on the Flathead Reservation. I connect the Flathead herd to my central familial line by discussing the trauma of Buffalo Jones' 1893 sale of his bison to Michel Pablo, the then owner of the Flathead bison in "Blood Memory."

¹ “Writing back” originated as a post-colonial praxis. Jane Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea, which explores the original sin of Caribbean enslavement at the heart of Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Timothy Findley’s retelling of the biblical tale of Noah’s Arc in Not Wanted on the Voyage are early examples of post-colonial writing back (Ashcroft, 96). These works engage with an imperial discourse by re-writing canonical narratives. While these re-imaginings have influenced my approach, I hope the multiplicity of performative and academic voices move my “writing back” beyond the work its post-colonial antecedents undertook.
This section connects the suffering documented in the rail travel from Buffalo Jones' ranch in Kansas to the Flathead Reservation, and the mirrored trauma in the round-up following Pablo's 1907 sale of his bison to the Canadian government. "Numbers" details the disastrous fate of the bison after the Canadian government assumed their management in 1912 at Buffalo National Park, where superintendents treated them as mere population figures in a ranching management framework. Finally, in "Apology," we arrive at Wood Buffalo National Park, where from 1925 to 1928 the Canadian government dumped 6,673 young bison from the familial group my writing follows.

The multiple registers in Part 2 creates a text that speaks to the multiple communities I belong to; they create openings for engagement often foreclosed by abstract theoretical writing. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson expressed a similar understanding of storytelling as theory when she wrote in “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation”:

> Meaning … is derived not through content or data, or even theory in a western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference. Individuals carry the responsibility for generating meaning within their own lives – they carry the responsibility for engaging their minds, bodies, and spirits in a practice of generating meaning. (11)

**Part 3: Thesis Exhibition and Related Programs and Outcomes**

The works in this section were introduced through their vital materiality in Part 1. Part 3 provides an expanded overview of the exhibitions *Remnants, Outlaws and Wallows* and my work in *GardenShip and State*. Viewed together, these heterogenous pieces can be understood as responses to three periods in settlers' relations with bison. The first was at the nadir of the bison population collapse in the 1880s. The second is their current state-controlled conservation and semi-domestication in ranching efforts. The third is a speculative decolonized future where Indigenous peoples and settler accomplices re-establish reciprocal relationships between bison and their kin. The future envisioned in the works created for this dissertation focus exclusively on this potential decolonized future. However, I can envision future works which tackle an increasingly probable pendulum swing in the other direction, towards increased domestication.
and privatization of bison. Part 3 discusses how works in Remnants, Outlaws and Wallows and GardenShip and State represents each of these periods.

Part 4: An Appendix of Other Projects

Carrying this dissertation’s message, response-ability, and ethos to communities beyond the university and art gallery compelled me to develop several projects detailed in Part 4. These projects take re-storying from the discursive realm into the material and relational. They include a podcast, interviews, residencies, workshops, performances, collaborations, and public talks. Part 4 provides links to interviews, documentation, and videos as well as narrative vignettes around their creation. Because my historical and land-based research invites the knowledge of diverse beings, it has the potential to be unendingly generative. And, as our changing political and ecological climate unfolds, I anticipate that my research-creation will continue to be responsive through partnership and in communities.
Beads, Bones, Clay, Flesh, Thread, and Bugs: Materially Vital Artworks

Beads

The beads I work with carry stories of mined sand, antiquated machinery in the Czech Republic, international markets of exchange, and finally, a transaction between a small Indigenous supplier in Moose Factory, Ontario, and me. This chain of exchanges and actions produce small global ripples into the human and non-human worlds. The glass beads are signifiers of cultural cross-pollination: Indigenous and settler women’s practices and traditions reciprocally and unevenly changing under the influence of capitalism, displacement, and personal relationships. I see inter-

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2 Metis scholar Sherry Farrell Racette writes that the original Cree and Anishinaabe beadwork would have employed quills, seeds, and shells. The words for these materials were animate. They were “living media on living surfaces to construct messages for an unseen viewer, actively
generational sharing of knowledge in these beads, often in the face of genocidal institutions that sought to erase that knowledge. Regarding my material engagement, I know how to bead because I have sat with other women, both Indigenous and settler, whose hands bent in the meditative act of spearing the tiny donuts on a needle, tacking them down and ripping out mistakes, again and again. When they are gifted, beaded items confer a value onto the wearer through the intricacy and commitment invested in the making. The beaded object declares the receiver is cared for and important. In the artworks Speculative Bison Futures, Romeo and Julien, and Forced Migration, I translate digital data that maps locations and population density through beadwork. To those who can register the care and commitment this gesture requires, I communicate the importance of wolves and bison's individual and specific lives. Yet, some of the sacred and historical meaning embodied in beadwork is not accessible to me. Beads laid engaging the spirit world through their artwork” (288). Farrell Racette explains, “the words, as well as the meanings, attached to the original, natural media were grandmothered onto the trade goods that gradually replaced them, items that have persisted to the present time. The Anishinabe term still in use today for beadwork—manidoominenskiikan—is an animate noun” (288). The survival of beadwork is incredible when one considers the Indian Act criminalized production of beadwork for ceremonial items until 1951. In addition, residential schools “removed girls from the teaching circles of older, more experienced artists” (Racette 294). Racette points out that, “excellence in traditional art forms typically relies on opportunities throughout childhood to observe, play, help, engage in mentoring relationships with experienced artists, and acquire the environmental and technical knowledge needed to secure and prepare raw materials” (294-295). The Canadian government robbed Indigenous beaders of these opportunities for generations. In a subsequent essay titled “Tuft Life: Stitching Sovereignty in Contemporary Indigenous Life” Racette notes that “the simple act of retaining and protecting knowledge was political—the materials themselves often believed to be living and potent, and the gestures of weaving and stitching deeply personal and meditative” (115). She identifies works by Indigenous artists Amy Malbeuf, Nadia Myre, and Ruth Cuthand as examples of beading as a contemporary artistic act of resistance.

3 I have taken up the slow processes of embroidery and beadwork to honour the lives of the subjects I represent, but also the materials I use. The time and attention this work requires expresses gratitude for the cost of its making: the cotton that grew and the soil that nourished it, the labourer that harvested and processed it, the waters polluted in the industrial process, the sheep whose body provided the wool and the trauma that the shearer may have inflicted, etc. I communicate respect by taking the responsibility of these gifts seriously and, I hope, returning the gift by directing attention towards the more-than-human beings that care for us (see Kimmerer 2013).
down by my hands will not begin to touch those depths. However, the act of beading itself always requires a stitch that Evelyn Walker describes as one of "attentive connection" that joins a single bead to the whole with a tensile strength that references relational holding and care (232). For me, the simple act of working with beads can be culturally sticky, uncomfortable, and even anxiety inducing — but so is telling bison stories. Bison, like beads, are no longer simply subjects overdetermined by Indigenous or Anglo-European cultures; they have been forever altered in the ways they have been alternately loved and lived with, used, and abused. And so, in response, I use beads to speak with bison.

Figure 3 Speculative Bison Futures (detail)

Speculative Bison Futures, my circular beadwork responds to data visualization created by Sanderson et al to communicate current bison distribution over their historical range and beyond on Turtle Island (figure 3). The beads in my adaptation stand in for bison bodies, controlled and corralled through ranching and conservation efforts. Their nearly monochromatic clusters allude to the massification of living beings, counted only as population numbers. The clusters also, conversely, communicate the interconnectedness of these beings; each bead is distinct and yet linked visually in shape and colour and materially by a thread.

Because of the genetic bottleneck at the nadir of bison extinction, the bison I am representing are literally all related to some extent. I allude to these familial connections through the choice of similarly coloured beads and their visual resonance with DNA sequencing imagery. However, the interconnectedness of the bison (and their representation through beads) does not reside only in the genetic but also in the relational. They are sewn together, and into the ‘Land,’ they bind together and are supported by the organic and inorganic felt that represents Turtle Island’s landmass.

Following the first map in the Sanderson report, three speculative ones use amoebic forms to indicate projected areas of ecological recovery made possible by the disruptive and generative force of free-ranging bison bodies (figure 4). I translated this data visualization by needle felting wool roving onto the areas indicated on Sanderson’s maps. This process produced swirling nebulous clouds, created when the loose wool was repeatedly pierced with a barbed needle on
top of the felt support, agitating the fibres to create a bond. I can pull it away at a moment’s notice. Compared to the solid and affixed beads, these potential bison bodies are ephemerally represented. Needle felting the red, pink, and orange dyed wool involved less control and precision; I found myself responding to the wisps and curls of the animal fibre.

In the foregoing, I have described a neatly conceptualized and executed work, haven’t I? But what does this act of artistic intention and material mastery have to say to the lived, multispecies world? Upon reflection, I have come to think, “Not much.” While I have been capable of describing my initial intentions for this work, I have always had misgivings about such a simplistic conceptualization and execution. My dissatisfaction accounts for the introduction of moths into the work

Moths

Tineola bisselliella, or common clothing moths, are adept at undermining conceptions of a separate and controlled human habitat. We spin, dye and weave wool and silk, transforming the fibres beyond recognition, allowing us to forget their material origins on or within animal bodies. The keratin within draws clothing moths to our transformed animal fibres, as does the moisture and minerals left behind by the human bodies that wear them. Clothing moth larvae consume our sweat along with our sweaters and rugs, their bodies and cocoons taking on beloved hues. Once they have established a colony in one of our human spaces, it is nearly impossible to evict them from the fibres they infest.

Figure 5 Tineola bisselliella (clothing moth), 2021
When I first conceived of *Speculative Bison Futures*, I knew I had to address the unpredictable and destructive forces that Sanderson et al. left out of their orderly map. The contours of Turtle Island, recognizable from colonially inscribed grade school classroom maps, seemingly remain unvarying in Sanderson et al.’s maps from 2008 to 2028 to 2058 to 2108. Given our current social and ecological upheaval, this appeared to me an unreasonable projection.

On Turtle Island, the interactions of significant herds of bison moving across all habitats within their historic ranges will undoubtedly alter the character, composition, and uses of those lands. Land repopulated by bison would be set aside, predominantly under the stewardship of First Nations and removed from destructive extractive economies. These massive swaths of Land would not be simply walled off from human use and intervention, as they often are in parks; the Western approach to conservation has mistakenly situated nature as dichotomously separate from the anthropogenic. Alternatively, the massively aspirational vision espoused by Sanderson et al., as well as the signatories of the Buffalo Treaty, requires a realignment of values so that the cultural, spiritual, and economic relationships between humans, animals, plants, and mother earth will be perpetuated under principles of reciprocity (The Buffalo 6). At a regional level, an ecologically significant return of bison will mean:

> [The] creation of landscape heterogeneity through grazing and wallowing, nutrient redistribution, interaction with hydrological processes, competition with other ungulates (e.g., elk, mule deer, caribou, moose), prey for wolves, grizzly bear, and humans, habitat creation for grassland birds, prairie dogs, and other commensals⁴…provision of carcasses for scavengers and as a localized nutrient source, opened access to vegetation through snow cover, modification of and use of fire regimes, disturbance of woody vegetation by rubbing, [and] provision of bison wool for small mammals and nesting birds. (Sanderson 254)

⁴ Commensals are organisms that form long-term symbiotic relationship in which the commensal gains benefits from another species that is neither benefited or harmed (“Commensalism”).
These potential changes strengthen the web of interrelations, dependencies, and resilience on the Land. They are enacted in Speculative Bison Futures through the stitching, piercing, and connecting of beads and fibers, which creates a denser, stronger amalgam. The return of free ranging bison is an act of “reconciliation with the land,” it is “not a nostalgic suggestion that believes that returns to a verdant past are desirable - or possible. Rather, it is a way of materializing decolonial justice in communities and places violently disrupted by settler colonization” (Taschereau Mamers 2021). Bison, the Land, even our bodies are in the process of becoming in response to a myriad of forces, including the forces of climate change—rising oceans, flooding, wildfires, erosion, hurricanes, droughts. Bison and the prairie grasslands that will follow in their wallows, dung patties, and hoof prints, have been identified as one of the “nature-based solutions” that will help mitigate floods, clean the air and water, and sequester carbon deep below the ground in root systems (Wood). However, the complexity of ever-evolving nonhuman actors makes me wary of plans that seek to exert anthropocentric designs on the more-than-human. By introducing into Speculative Bison Futures a destructive force whose agency would ultimately exceed my intentions, I intend to reflect this exceeding of human understanding and control. Hence, I set out to turn my textile map into a habitat for clothing moths.

In order to introduce the moth partners into my embroidery project, in 2019 I contacted etymologist Dr. Jeremy McNeil for help with locating and keeping alive clothing moths. He advised me that wool with little cleaning or processing would be ideal for my purposes, but spraying yeast dissolved in water onto the wool could be a good method of nourishing the moths. Dr. McNeil asked colleagues for clothing moths without luck. So, I pleaded on social media for friends to contact me if they had any infestations, but alas, the predominance of synthetic fibres in most closets does not lure clothing moths into our homes. Inevitably, it took an explicit rejection of synthetics to connect me to moths. Fellow artist Kate Carder was working at the Schneider Haus Museum doing historical reenactments of wool spinning when she found bags and bags of raw wool infested with moths, eggs, larvae, and excrement. In the experiments that followed the delivery of this moth microcosm, I discovered that spraying my processed wool felt with yeast water was not enough and that it was impossible to distinguish moth eggs from moth feces. So, I decided to seed the
clean expanse of the “water” surrounding the landmass in *Speculative Bison Futures* with waves of contaminated raw wool, needle felting it in as I had done with the clean dyed coloured wool that represents future bison. Over the following year, the larva would consume the wool in unexpected ways creating ripples and occasionally burrowing small holes into the fabric. While I had expected destruction by the moths to be quicker and more concentrated, their appetites and populations responded to many factors I tried but could not fully control, such as my studio's heat, humidity, and dark quiet. And, of course, their lifecycles are measured out in moth time, not human time.

*Speculative Bison Futures*, an artwork/moth habitat, is a site for lively interactions and will remain so for as long as I can house it. I anticipate developing strategies to counteract the moth’s deconstruction of the work in the coming years. Unlike climate change, it is a cycle that is alternately generative and destructive and one I look forward to engaging.

Western biologists once thought that ecological systems innately sought conditions of harmony and balance, and this ideology promoted conservation ethics of *return* that were bound to fail.\(^5\) I explore this failure in the artworks discussed in this section and the narratives in “Part 2” because it reveals a foundational flaw in settler-colonial ontologies. Conservation is a western construct predicated on returning to an imagined Edenic historical baseline *before* human interference. It falsely leads us to believe that if only we can set aside some protected pockets of Land where we can roll back the clock to pre-colonial contact, we can re-establish a healthy, pristine nature devoid of human contamination. It imagines that these will be sites of flourishing. The foregoing understanding of conservation is born out of the concept of *terra nullius*, the discursive text established in a series of Papal Bulls in the 1400s that erased Indigenous sovereignty and relationships to the Land. But, as a settler artist, researcher, and mother committed to environmental and decolonial justice, I believe that instead of yearning for an imagined ‘nature,’ it is profoundly important for settlers to embrace new ways of approaching conservation, ways

\(^5\) Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker succinctly point to this dichotomy in neoliberal environmental movements when they write of “progress narratives of controlling the future or sustainability narratives of saving the past. Both largely obfuscate our implication therein” (558).
influenced by the concept of two-eyed seeing. We must learn from Indigenous ontologies that ecosystems are in perpetual cycles of disruption and renewal. Humans are but one group of actors in a network of timeless dynamic relationships, rather than ‘masters’ setting in motion a unidirectional causal timeline (Barsh & Marlor 588). Recognizing our fellow creatures as kin proposes a different model of care, one which has sustained countless human and more-than-human communities since time immemorial (Dove 26). In such an infinitely complex and interdependent world, all we can do is ensure our disruptions stem from relationships of reciprocity; only then can they result in a more resilient and heterogeneous world. It is this ontological shift that I am seeking to enact in my art practice, and, indeed, through my politics, and personal life.

“Two-eyed seeing,” or etuaptmumk as it's known in Mi'kmaw, is a concept of “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing, and to use both these eyes together for the benefit of all” (Elder Dr. Albert Marshall qtd Reid 243). Adopting “two-eyed seeing” however, cannot be seen as a move toward “settler innocence,” and settler academics must be wary of perpetuating long standing practices of knowledge extraction from Indigenous cultures (Tuck & Yang 36). A truly decolonized approach to conservation is incommensurable with US and Canadian parks systems. To achieve decolonization in this sphere we must convert federal and provincial parks into Indigenous Protected Conservation Areas. The Indigenous Circle of Experts Report defines IPCAs as: “lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems” (5).

IPCs can be spaces where Western science can complement Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests that such intercultural partnerships must be led by the model of the “Three Sisters.” This triadic Indigenous agricultural method involves planting corn, beans, and squash together. First, the corn grows, providing support. In this metaphor, corn represents Indigenous knowledge which must create the structure that supports and directs inquiry. Bean, the middle sister, represents Western science, “she is curious and wanders in many directions” (Kimmerer “Braiding Ways of Knowing”). When supported by corn, bean is directed and grows up to fill the spaces between corn’s leaves. In this way, bean (Western science) does not take over, creating a monoculture, or displacing corn (TEK). Finally, the third sister squash shades the ground and creates a microclimate for the sisters to thrive in balance and sovereignty. Kimmerer considers the values of reciprocity and respect in the individual and the institution as creating the microclimate where braided knowledge can grow, not blended but in symbiosis.
Bones

I have been sent the well-known image of two men standing on a pile of bison bones more times than I can count. It is often splashed across slideshows or posted on social media feeds to make palpable the enormity of the bison's eradication and man's indifference.\(^7\) Shock moves people to share this image but, as Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, this shock resides in its novelty. When I first saw the bison bone photograph, its resonances with images that emerged following the Holocaust stirred within me what Sontag calls a "negative epiphany" (20). But Sontag was right. After repeated exposure, I became anesthetized to the horror. And so, I fumbled and felt

\(^7\) In 2021, Jay Soule unveiled *Built on Genocide*, a public art installation for the Luminato art festival in Toronto, Ontario. Soule’s powerful installation centered around a 14-foot-high mound of replica bison skulls. Referencing the same archival images that influenced my work, Soule’s monumental construction sat in “Ontario Square” at the Harbourfront Centre, the CN Tower looming in the background. Soule’s title, *Built on Genocide*, reminds viewers that Canada has the genocide of Indigenous peoples at its foundation. The skulls' presence (and relevance) in Toronto in 2021 reminds us that this genocide is not elsewhere or in the distant past. The skull mound is a highly potent work, particularly in this pandemic moment when viewers are engaging with art primarily through social media. It is important to note that circling the mound are Soviet-style posters confronting the ongoing atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples with stinging dark humour. Works like *Five White Lies* employ satire and caricature, while *White Wash* and *Adoptions of Mass Destruction* have a devastating affective power. With their poignant critique of the current "reconciliation" period, these posters have been far less shared and covered online and in the media.
my way toward creating a work that could contain the semiotic density necessary to communicate the story of bison destruction and the bone industry.

Through my research I found that the harvesting of bison bones was part of a tightly woven web of interactions between economics, ecology, and genocide. I do not take up the term genocide casually or figuratively. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly’s Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide resolution 260 A (1948) defines genocide as:

the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

a) Killing members of the group;
b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Many decolonial scholars believe that past and ongoing actions by the US and Canadian federal governments against Indigenous peoples fit within this definition of genocide. Despite the expansive definition given in the UN's convention, however, there has been a trend in 'genocide studies' to limit the designation of genocide to mass murder and instead assign the term 'cultural genocide' to North American colonial crimes, as instanced in the introduction to the executive summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. It is thus perversely ironic that the images of piles of bison bones at railway sidings should evoke Holocaust imagery because it is this comparison with the “most extreme form of violence imaginable” that limits the colloquial understanding of the genocidal intentions of colonial governments (Woolford et al. 2).

But, more important, perhaps, than the refusal to recognize the colonial genocide in North America as such are the expanded definitions and understandings of the designation 'genocide' that prove valuable to survivors. For example, Justice Murray Sinclair told an audience at the University of Manitoba in 2012 that "genocide" is used by Indigenous elders and survivors to
describe their experiences and the experiences of their ancestors at the hands of the government, churches, and society (qtd Woolford et al. 1).

Additionally, in a move towards a more expansive rather than exclusive definition of genocide, Indigenous scholar and filmmaker Tasha Hubbard argues that the extirpation of the bison constitutes an act of genocide (Woolford et al. 293). While she acknowledges that the slaughter of the bison was a tool in the subjugation of numerous Indigenous peoples and the Land itself, she encourages us to adopt an Indigenous paradigm that “expands the conception of *people* to include other-than-human animals” (Woolford et al. 294). She argues that "according to Indigenous ways of knowing, humans do not hold exclusive title to personhood, and therefore neither to genocide” (Woolford et al. 295). In a chapter titled “Buffalo Genocide in Nineteenth-Century North America: Kill, Skin, Sell,” Hubbard details how bison and plains Indigenous peoples were considered inseparable, to the point of being conceptually indistinguishable in the minds of military leaders such as General George Custer, who was known to have “described tactics of the buffalo hunt in the same terms as a military action against indigenous peoples” (Woolford et al. 296). Understanding the trauma of the bison slaughter by both government actors and hide hunters should not, however, be limited to killing members of a genos—a social group of a common descent. As will be illustrated at length in Part 2 of this dissertation, these forces also removed calves and destroyed familial relationships. These calves often witnessed the slaughter of their nearest kin, and the stresses of constant pursuit and slaughter broke down social relationships contributing to the genocidal project (Woolford et al. 299).

The grief and mourning observed amongst bison cannot be discounted as anthropomorphism. Bison have social relationships and knowledge, and their experiences of maternal love and suffering matter. These truths are at the heart of my project. Accepting this worlding of bison as persons and understanding the campaign of eradication waged against them justifies the application of the term genocide. We must be wary, however, of focusing on tropes of extermination, which Hubbard describes as “colonial elegies, which lamented their loss with a pen held in one hand and a gun in the other” (Woolford et al. 302). In naming these genocides, we must hold space for stories of "survivance" (Woolford et al. 12).
These bones, the abject evidence of genocide, were extracted from the Land and sent east, some to Michigan to become fertilizer, ink, or to filter sugar. Some were sent even farther, all the way to England to be ground into bone china. In becoming pieces of material culture, clay and ink subsumed bison bodies and obliterated their presence. This erasure moved me to create the work *bone rick* (2019).

*bone rick* began with an experiment; I set out to create bone-black ink. I wanted to produce it myself and not let an industrial process enshroud the sights and smells of the corpse. I found a farm in St. Marys, Ontario that sold bison meat at a local farmer’s market. I requested a bag of bones which I took home, then boiled off the fat and marrow that clung to them. There was no denying my implication in death as the rancid smell filled my kitchen and then my entire home. A cloud of vapour enveloped my face when I lifted the lid; it left an oily, cloying sensation on my skin. Thoroughly cleaning the bones took days. Care, manifested in mournful gratitude tinged with guilt, is a way to honour my relationship with the bison whose bones I use.\(^8\) This belief sustains and guides me through a practice I continue to struggle with.

After I stripped down the bones, scraped them clean, and scooped out their marrow, I hammered them into shards. Finally, I ordered a laboratory crucible and answered many health, safety, and ethics questions to fire them in a university kiln. Through private conversations with researchers involved with the animal ethics review board, I discovered that the university is not concerned with the bodies of animals that are already dead. I knew that I had to heat the bones slowly to 800° to 900°C in the absence of oxygen, but my experiences firing clay with air trapped inside made me wary of sealing the crucible. My fear wound up being fortuitous; the availability of oxygen in the firing meant I produced bone ash, a friable white version of the bone that I then ground and turned into a silkscreen ink.

\(^8\) Deborah Bird Rose writes of a complex ecological understanding of care when she states that it is:

an ethical response involving tenderness, generosity, and compassion, and care is an ongoing assumption of responsibility in the face of continuing violence and peril. Pulses of harm and care offer a peculiarly telling story of the Anthropocene, highlighting multispecies entanglements, conflicting ways of being human, mass death, and, through it all… a great and joyful desire for life. (G58)
My inadvertent blanching of the bone material connected the process to the 1997 work *Buffalo Bone China* by Hunkpapa Lakota artist Dana Claxton. In this work, Claxton was responding to the use of bison bone ash in British ceramics in the 1880s, when the Dominion government leveraged the eradication of the bison to ensure Indigenous sublimation to colonization. A layered and emotional work, *Buffalo Bone China*, incorporated performative destruction with Claxton smashing bone china before an audience, bundling the shards in a sanctified circle, and then exhibiting the remnants before a video collage of buffalo. Curator Tania Willard recognized that Claxton's performance and ceremony convey the story of both the bison and her Lakota ancestors' decimation and survival "in a way no textbook can ever retell these stories" (*Dana Claxton: Buffalo Bone China*). *Buffalo Bone China* violently releases the bison's remains; they are no longer obscured by the form of a teacup or plate. Her performance reveals the affective potential of a seemingly banal object by critically exposing its history and materiality. In something as seemingly lifeless as heirloom china, the bison and their stories are indexed.

My own family reportedly emigrated to Turtle Island from England and France many generations ago, eventually settling in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. My parents inherited a stinging consciousness of their working-class status and British bone china came to symbolize their class aspirations and an assertion of their anglophone identity. This attachment to material culture and its relationship to settler identity demonstrates complicity's long reach. *bone rick*, and its attention to labour and materiality, is a subdued response to the affective cry of *Buffalo Bone China*. The audio work that accompanies it, *bone rick: An Epitaph* (*See Part 3*), was my first
effort to reframe inherited settler narratives with the embodied accountability of aural storytelling, an approach I have continued to work through in most of my subsequent pieces.

Figure 8 Wallow, 2016-2017

Clay and Flesh

As a settler in Southern Ontario, one of my first entry points to ‘knowing’ bison was through taxidermy displays at the natural history museums I loved as a child. Taxidermy is just stretching a thin layer of fur and flesh over an artful human-made form. Glass or resin eyes give

9 In her book, Displaying Death and Animating Life, Jane Desmond notes that the dioramic taxidermy display is a space where animals are presumed to “perform” themselves—that is, to render an accurate and authentic vision of their animality. These stagings not only index the “reality” of the animal body, through the presentation of its authentic exterior covering, but also appear to present scientific “truth” in that their posings, postures, and relationships are underwritten by the authority of the museum, its scientific staff, and prevailing beliefs about the organization of human and animal typologies. In turn, the presumed “naturalness” of “nature” could be used to underwrite ideologies of social difference and hierarchy, thus naturalizing relations that were products of historical relations, as Donna Haraway has argued. (31)
the illusion of liveliness. It is seductive. There is a morbid pleasure in looking into those eyes, but eventually, you become aware you are just seeing your reflection.

Through my research, I discovered that the commercially available forms under stretched hides were strange and affective figures, eyeless and flayed with mouths stretched wide in a silent call. The public, of course, is never meant to see these forms because their artifice would expose the violence required to create a ‘life-like’ presentation of the arrested taxonomical subject. So, I decided to create life-size ceramic sculptures that resemble those forms. The attention needed to make them was a gesture of care that would have been absent if I had instead purchased the original referent. I sculpted a cow and a calf to rest on their backs, supported by low wooden platforms. When triggered by sensors on the floor, speakers embedded in the bases play field recordings of cows and calves communicating, which I made in 2016 at Riding Mountain National Park. This work gestures to the simulacra of the natural history museum, but instead of imitating life, it proposes a palpable absence. The grunts and cries that resonate through these clay bodies are echoes of a relationship destroyed when we attempt to display it in frozen tableaus.

I constructed these figures out of terracotta clay. On reflection, I recognize it as a sign of how disconnected the boxed clay was from the earth that I didn't consider what it meant to make bison bodies out of material straight out of the Land.

Bison have profoundly impactful relationships that engineer ecosystem change. For example, they establish spaces of disruption and thus regeneration through wallowing. Their wallows create pools for retaining water, and their movements and browsing patterns effect the courses of ________________

10 For French philosopher and activist Simone Weil, attention and care are inextricably tied. Attention is an open waiting for understanding, an emptying of ego motivated by the pleasure of learning. This type of attention is also fundamental to beholding the suffering of another and our ethical response to it. While Weil’s ascetic martyrdom makes her model a complicated one to aspire to, her poetic and theoretical writings can still guide our ethical relations with one another. As Cynthia Wallace writes, Weil, “calls us to the miracle of presence in lives beset by struggle, to the shards of beauty and care still possible in the wreckage of our late-stage planet. This practice of attention need not ask of all of us the sacrifice it asked of her, but it asks of us something. To ask the question, of each other and at points ourselves: What are you going through? To listen to the answer. To find ourselves awake again, in a way we’d forgotten we could be.”
rivers and the forming of banks. When herds numbered hundreds or even thousands, their hooves tilled the soil enabling the Land to absorb precious rainfall, recharging underground aquifers.\textsuperscript{11} As agents of disruption, Bison bodies have profound relationships to Land and water. I now apprehend their calls resonating through clay as an echo of the deep rumbling of bison hooves on the Land.

Prior to working with artist KC Adams, I could not recognize a fraction of what clay carried in its particles. By way of providing some background, KC and I met when we worked for a community arts organization in Winnipeg called Art City. We later reconnected through workshops and talks where she shared her research into harvesting and producing traditional Nêhiyaw clay vessels and how this practice creates a responsibility to the Land. Now, many years hence, I approached KC with a proposition. I was in possession of a hide that I had removed from a taxidermy mount, and I wanted to gift it to someone who would return it to a

\textit{Figure 9 Reclaim and Restore (Still is linked to full video), 2019-2020}

\textsuperscript{11} Winona LaDuke writes in her essay “Buffalo Nation: Environmental Benefits of American Bison and Efforts to Restore Them to the Great Plains”:

The fate of the buffalo has vast implications for native ecosystems as well as Native peoples. Buffalo determine landscapes. For thousands of years, the Great Plains, the largest single ecosystem in North America, was maintained by the buffalo. By their sheer numbers, weight, and behavior, they cultivated the prairie. It is said that their thundering hooves danced on the earth as they moved by the millions; their steps resounded in the vast underground water system, the Ogallala Aquifer, stimulating its health and seeding the prairies. And their destruction set in motion the ecological and economic crisis that now afflicts the region. (66)
lively existence, through teaching and ceremony.\textsuperscript{12} I asked KC to accept its stewardship. She agreed, and slowly, through emails and zoom calls, we discussed the problematic history and power dynamics of a \textit{gift}. Instead, we negotiated an exchange; I would give KC the hide and with it my labour and care in removing and restoring the bison’s flesh. In return, KC taught me about the connection between clay and the traditionally feminine responsibility to water.\textsuperscript{13} She also gifted me a song that honours the bison. I shared these teachings with my daughter, and KC shared them with her mother and son (figure 10).

\textit{Figure 10 KC Adams and Michelle Wilson, Honouring (Still is linked to full video), 2021}

\textsuperscript{12} Through his work on repatriation projects with the Blackfoot Confederacy, late Glenbow Museum curator Gerry Conaty came to recognize how vital relationships with ceremonial objects are. In his book \textit{We Are Coming Home}, he notes that the stewards of bundles swaddled and cared for them like relatives and that participation in ceremonies kept the objects “alive and vibrant” (24). This liveliness is utterly absent from taxidermy’s arrested approximation of life.

\textsuperscript{13} KC Adams spoke at the \textit{Outlaws, Remnants and Wallows} symposium which was held online in conjunction with the exhibition at McIntosh gallery in September 2021. During her presentation KC shared the following about the role of artists within her culture:

\begin{quote}
Art is essential. Art is considered animate in Cree and Anishinaabe language… Also, art represents relationships. Between not only community, but also the animals. My brothers and sisters, the animals that walk on the earth, the spirit, the spirits from up above and the spirits below. And art also really talks about that connection to land and water where you come from… oftentimes we put it on our bodies, either tattooing, or clothing that we wore, or the spiritual objects like pipe medicine bags. All of those materials were communicating to the spirits and the ancestors for help… That is our way of being spiritual is through art practice so…I like to think of everybody in my community as an artist because it was essential to their survival.
\end{quote}
It was not until we had completed our exchange and its documentation that I could truly hear one of KC's lessons: the gestures that call to us and intuitively feel right will unfold with complexity if we let them. I could not see the relationship between the bison and the clay when it came, seemingly inert, from a box. Only when I waded through streams to harvest it, when I taught my daughter about the millennia of weather and water it takes to turn rocks into clay, did I understand the responsibility of working with it.

![Figure 11 Romeo and Julian (Photo linked to audio work) 2016 -2020](image)

**Thread**

Textiles are dense sites: materially layered, sensually appealing, and heavy with semiotic interrelations. This density is often disregarded, as work taken up in the domestic sphere and produced within an economy of care often is. Curator and scholar Ellyn Walker challenges

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14 Fibre works *have* historically been highly valued outside of the domestic sphere. In the Middle Ages “some highborn families covered their walls in tapestries shot through with red silks, a form of art that was far more expensive than painting, and at the time far more desirable” (Greenfield ch3). The valuation of textile work in this instance, however, is based on its ability to confer status as an expression of wealth and would have been purchased rather than produced by the ladies of the home. Like the differentiation between haute cuisine and home cooking, the production gains recognition and value when taken up by men in the public domain rather than produced for an economy of care.
facile relationships to fibre works by regarding stitches as text; sites “for close reading” which can open to the attentive viewer “new ways to look, feel and listen more deeply to cultural objects and their extended relations” (219). Understanding embroidery as a new and yet ancient text resonates deeply with my praxis. For instance, in my embroidered and beaded mapping work *Romeo and Julian* (figure 11) each layer of fabric and thread encodes different meanings and narratives. On the surface, the piece proposes the remembering of two wolves, their relationships to the Land, and one another. This textile map “conveys the touch and negotiation of hands in motion, and allows space for individual agency, processes of undoing and intimate imagining” (Walker 217). In doing so, *Romeo and Julian* opens imaginative and empathetic possibilities through reinterpreting disembodied GPS tracking data.

Conversely, however, *Romeo and Julian’s* cotton canvas, the warp and weft of its literal, physical foundation, speaks of the ‘immaculate grid’; the perfect squares that divvied up the stolen Land that became Canada and the USA, along lines of longitude and latitude (Carter *Imperial Plots*, 39). The machine-stitched *roads* cite such a cartesian space yet again. Stitched upon the earth as if it were a blank sheet, North America’s immaculate grid illustrates how the long shadow of *terra nullius* blots out the presence of ancient nations; “the grid obscured and ignored land use and tenure systems that were based on generations of accumulated knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the great variations in the landscape” (Carter *Imperial Plots*, 39). *Romeo and Julian* alludes to the beings divided and elided by this grid. Judeo-Christian ideology, carried to this land by settlers, insists that its disciples assert their *dominion over all the earth*. The grid is how that dominion inscribes itself upon the Land and its echoes can be read in the discursive text of this fibre-work, but also throughout the tradition of settler women’s quilts. In the stories that comprise Part 2 of my dissertation, I

15 The grid system of land surveying was at the heart of the colonial enterprise, and it resulted in a “stunning patchwork quilt” of fields and roads (Carter *Imperial Plots*, 39). Canada’s first surveyor-general, Colonel John Stoughton Dennis, described the Canadian West as a “white sheet,” a blank space ready to become a patchwork of private and ‘crown land’ (Carter *Imperial Plots*, 39). In considering this conception of the land as a divisible grid, it is productive to look closely at *Romeo and Julian* and note the instances where the agency of the land refutes this effort to impose a geometric grid on its lively and varied ground.
illustrate how this relationship to Land structures the human and more-than-human societies that sprouted within its bounds.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} In 2009 the United Church of Canada released a report entitled \textit{Reviewing Partnership in the Context of Empire}, in which the church attempted to address and reconcile Christianity’s complicity in colonialism. The report’s authors acknowledge the employment of scripture to justify subjugation, writing, “our theology and biblical interpretation have often supported sexism, racism, colonialism, and the exploitation of creation… Theologies of empire have understood God and men as separate from and superior to women, indigenous peoples, and nature” (26). They assert, however, that the Bible actually “paints a picture of the mutual interdependence and interrelationship of God and all creatures, Mutual relationship characterizes God in the creation stories of Genesis 1—3” (26). Unfortunately, it seems doubtful that any church yields the power to meaningfully alter the longstanding hierarchical ontologies that continue to justify relationships of exploitation and dominance.
Like *Romeo and Julian*, *Forced Migration* is a textile map that traces the movements and relationships of more-than-human beings. A striking difference with *Forced Migration* is the complete absence of the grid. Instead, the Land is veined with red waterways, and the very *ground* itself is wool felt; an imbricated density of fibres, not woven but matted together using pressure, moisture, and friction. This fabric acts as a lively model for the narratives contained in this piece, not orderly and linear but enmeshed tendrils of interrelationality. Silver threads criss-cross the surface, each one counted and stitched to mark the life of a single bison captured, bred, and claimed by the settler project of conservation. The gesture of marking each life resists the massification of non-human lives; with each thread, I count their individual existence. It is an
affective act that reinscribes their subjecthood. Forced Migration, however, goes beyond the visual mark-making gesture. It invites the viewer to touch the conductive strands, which trigger my recorded narration of an interrelated web of stories.

In his essay "Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals," James Stanescu examines disparate writings by Judith Butler to establish an understanding of "precarious life" that opens productive space to grieve for the lives of animals. Precarious life is a social ontology that understands the conditions of maintaining life as interdependent and that our vulnerability creates communities of kinship. We mourn because those that nourish our interconnected lives perish, and our mourning acknowledges both our shared embodiment but also keeps the dead within us. Stanescu writes, “Mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other,” and it is that fragility of life that binds us together because survival requires sociality (569). Butler, and later Stanescu, have been galvanizing writers in the development of my research-creation. I felt called to create the work in this dissertation when I read:

It is our very ability to be wounded, our very dependency, that brings us together. Mourning is a testament to such a shared embodiment, which is the source of its paradoxical productivity. It can bring us together in monuments, in rituals, in shared stories and memories, and sometimes in collective action. (Stanescu 579)

I embrace two conceptual horizons in my work that Stanescu could not or would not make space for in his writing, however. First, Stanescu begins his essay by evoking a scene from a grocery store where the mourner of animal lives must disavow their grief for the anonymous bodies on display. Unfortunately, he does not make space for an individual that perceives the grievable life of the Other and finds connection by being literally sustained by the Other. We may not find such an ethical relationship in the grocery store, but Stanescu's Western perspective limits his ability to make space for it. I question where Indigenous hunters fit within Stanescu’s understanding of precarious life and consumption. Second, Stanescu advocates for an interspecies practice of mourning and denounces anthropocentrism yet does not acknowledge the gestures of grief observable in the more-than-human realm. Taking the bison as an example, I would argue that the grievability of their lives is in part supported by how vehemently they fight to protect the lives of one another and the individual risks they take to do so. Also, bison manifest grief when they lose a community member; they stay with and return to the dead, try to revive them, and vocalize their pain (Woolford et al. 300). As Barbara J. King writes in How Animals Grieve, when animals grieve, they "assign value to a life once lived, a life now mourned" (144).
Audio stories from *Forced Migration* are embedded at the beginning of each of the sections in Part 2, and the route travelled by bison on the Land, and in threads on my map, guide the central structure. The eight narratives: “Alloway,” “Bedson,” “Fight or Flight,” “Buffalo Jones,” “Search for Facts,” “Blood Memory,” “Numbers,” and “Apology,” follow a lineage of bison as they are extracted from their families and the Land, reconceived as property, and shuffled from owner to owner. In the archives surrounding bison conservation saviour myths have developed around these owners. “Alloway,” “Bedson,” and “Buffalo Jones” attempt to re-story these men and complicate their legacies. The narratives in “Part 2” span centuries, zoom in and out from microbes on a blade of grass tickling a bison’s nose to national policies, and shift from my own embodied perspective to an imagined more-than-human one.

Throughout this text, stories, concepts, and characters are reiterated, acting as entangled tendrils that weave in and out, disrupting the illusion of progress and linearity. The dissertation itself is an act of research-creation whose process resists the idea of academic writing as “a transparent medium, always somehow after the event, a simple 'outcome' of a research which always takes
place elsewhere, in the archive, in the field or the focus group, on the web” (Gibbs).

These introductory audio vignettes intentionally unsettle what has conventionally been ‘allowable’ in a majority of academic settings. My voice as the narrator is never tempered by the need to appear objective. On the contrary, it is impassioned and personal. The inclusion of my literal voice highlights the intentionally performative textual voices throughout. This multiplicity of narrative registers enacts a feminist epistemology that sees rigour not in the pretense of “point-of-viewlessness” but rather in “situated knowledges” at the intersection “of multiple systems of domination” (Tallbear). The form of these layered narratives “aims not simply to make a point, but have a point — which is to bring about a certain change in a certain set of narrative relations” (Gibbs).

In complicating the affective and formal norms of dissertation writing, I am “allow[ing] the voice of the other to interrogate the voice of theory in such a way as to reveal its particularity and its partiality.” (Gibbs). This writing is an act of fictocriticism, the haunted writing that feminist theorist Anna Gibbs poetically describes as;

traced by numerous voices which work now in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord… [it is] an act of defiance, an attempt to exorcise the paralyzing interdictions of disciplinary academic authority,

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18 The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) defines research-creation as “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation” (“Definitions of Terms”). In addition, I define my practice as research-creation because it emerges from an imbricated relationship between the theoretical and the material where neither prefigures the other. This work attempts to challenge disciplinarity by engaging with theories and ways of knowing from the humanities, social sciences, and biological sciences. Still, it is also rooted in specific human and more-than-human contexts and relationships. I want to find the most cogent mode to tell the stories that compel me, regardless of disciplinarity. In doing so, I make discoveries about both the content and modalities of these stories.

19 Writing as a research-creation practice resonates with Gibbs’ definition of “fictocriticism” as “a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched” (Gibbs).
feminist writers in particular have sought other relationships to such forms of authority than those of simple submission and unthinking repetition. (2005)

In this textual project I am using archival research and citation, tools of Western systems of knowledge production, to write in opposition to the way we (settlers) have understood our relationships to bison and the Land, but also to highlight the privileges and limitations of my own white, Western ways of knowing. I do not attempt to represent the experiences or beliefs of the many First Nations who have lived in kinship with bison since time immemorial, these are not my stories to tell.\textsuperscript{20} However, I would not have been able to begin the process of unlearning the colonial mindset without the knowledge generously shared by Indigenous writers such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Tanya Talaga, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Kim Tallbear, Tasha Hubbard, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Zoe Todd, and Winona LaDuke, without whose stories I could not have written those that follow.

\textsuperscript{20} The echoes between the plight of bison and First Nations at the hands of colonizers are palpable in these stories. I want to be clear this is not because they are interchangeable metaphors for one another’s suffering. The experiences of these beings mirror one another, as theorist Aph Ko points out, because the logics and systems of white supremacy have labeled both as animal in relation to the white human. And so, both have been treated as a wild other, to be conquered and brought into a proper relation to white human society.
Part 2

Introduction

When I began researching an expansive understanding of bison, I wrote multiple branching timelines reaching back to the Pleistocene era. I quickly found myself entangled in a web of stories. Being enveloped in all these ways of knowing bison has enriched my writing about them, yet I knew I had to find a thread that I could guide a reader along, to help them apprehend bison through the pluriversality of their stories. So, I decided to trace the past, present, and future that coalesce in the bison I knew at Riding Mountain National Park, and their kin, in Parks Canada's conservation system.

What follows in Part 2 is an embodied, speculative history of a familial line of bison. The first vignette, ‘Alloway,’ simultaneously recounts the capture of bison calves that became the foundation of conservation herds throughout Turtle Island and critiques the only recorded narrators, Charles Alloway and his wife, Maude. The main text underscores their efforts to center Alloway as a white ‘saviour’ instead of the demonstrably ‘true leader’ of the domestication effort, James McKay. The footnotes contextualize this story by connecting it to the treaty process and resistance by tribal nations led by Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) and Pitikwahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker).

The subsequent vignette recounts the transfer of McKay's bison to Stoney Mountain penitentiary after their purchase by Samuel Bedson, for whom the section is named. In this vignette, I focus on three characters, a bison calf born the morning of their removal to Stoney Mountain, Bedson himself, and Mistahimaskwa, who the confederation government imprisoned at the penitentiary after his failed opposition to the treaty and reservation system. 'Bedson' presents their respective fates as interconnected.

The next two sections represent two parallel stories; ‘Fight or Flight’ viscerally imagines the capture of bison from the Texas Panhandle from a cow’s embodied perspective, and ‘Buffalo Jones’ examines the self-made myth of their captor and tormentor. The bison discussed in 'Alloway' and 'Bedson' were sold to Buffalo Jones and joined his captured calves. These two
stories demonstrate the significance of bison kinship and how the entangled ideologies of anthropocentrism and white supremacy blinded Jones to the worthiness of these others’ lifeways.

‘Search for Facts’ follows ‘Fight or Flight’ and ‘Buffalo Jones’ because it recounts the formation of a bison herd on the Flathead reservation, which Jones’ bison would eventually join. ‘Search for Facts’ is a journey through the archives to trace the construction of a racist, false truth, as it is told and retold. This section ends with the long-silenced story of Ataticeʔ and his son Łatatí. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes embrace this version of the truth. Tracing the white narrative and the broader political context in the footnotes makes apparent how the dominant archive extinguishes and obscures Indigenous models of care and kinship in an effort to legitimize land and resource theft.

‘Blood Memory’ begins on the Flathead Reservation with the roundup of bison after their purchase by the Canadian government. It explores how trauma affects animals: human and more-than-human. In the footnotes, the text explores epigenetics as a physical expression of ‘blood memory,’ a concept embraced by many Indigenous peoples. This section asks the reader to reconsider the general perception of conservation as serving the ‘greater good’ and the multigenerational consequences of getting it wrong.

After their removal from the Flathead Reservation, The Canadian government transferred the bison to Buffalo National Park near Wainwright, Alberta. This historical moment is where ‘Numbers’ picks up their trail. The vignette contrasts the early conservationists’ perspective on bison as a numerically quantifiable resource with a holistic understanding of bison as relational beings in a complex ecological web. The narrative illustrates the failures that result from an impoverished Western comprehension of Land.21

The final vignette "Apology," breaks with the narrative structure of the seven previous sections. It is an open letter to the current management of Parks Canada. In it, I propose an apology to the Indigenous peoples the government has forced from their Lands in Wood Buffalo; nations which

21 I learned my capitalization of Land from Dragon Smith and Grandjambe’s Briarpatch Magazine article "To Wood Buffalo National Park, with Love." They explain capitalization as a way to "convey its encompassing importance. When [they] speak of (L)and, [they] acknowledge that it includes People, Cultures, languages, and knowledge."
have been barred from their ancient relationships of reciprocity with the Land. Additionally, this section differs from those preceding it in my inclusion of actionable steps towards decolonized relationships with bison, Indigenous peoples, and the Land in Wood Buffalo. While these recommendations may take the section toward the realm of policymaking, the recommendations, developed in partnership with local activists Chloe Dragon-Smith and Robert Grandjambe, are essential; an apology without a commitment to action may assuage guilt but does not remediate harm.

These creative works of fictocriticism are not straightforward, unidimensional narratives. Each of the eight sections in Part 2 begins with an audio work followed by an expanded multi-perspectival iteration of the story. I have crafted these texts to speak in two different registers, all performative versions of the multiple identities I inhabit in my role as 'scholar.' The central text uses this font (Century Gothic). This narrator uses archival stories’ specificity to critique interconnected white-supremacist, anthropocentric, and colonial ideologies. She cites her sources but maintains a skeptical tone. Underwriting the central narrator is a more formal one who speaks within the footnotes and in the prescribed font of a thesis (Times New Roman). To assert her authority, she appeals to the protocols of the academy. She explains how the central narrative enacts feminist, new materialist, and decolonial theory. Simply put, the footnotes are doing the work of telling while the main text is doing the work of showing.

Taken as a whole, Part 2 explores storytelling as a methodology for enacting theory. It employs several registers to convey multiple subjectivities, but also the layered ways of knowing necessary to live in a pluriverse. It enacts some of the complexity settlers must embrace when trying to know beings, like bison, whom we are culturally, socially, ecologically, and historically enmeshed with. I address this writing fundamentally to my settler readers, because nonhierarchical imbricated understandings of the more-than-human have always already been rooted in many Indigenous ontological traditions.
Charles Alloway tried to hold onto a bison bull. He wanted to anchor him to a post, but with speed and force the bull dragged him. The rope lacerated his hands – cutting to the bone – an encounter that left him with scars he took to his grave.

Alloway tried to perpetuate and control the myth of how he ‘saved the buffalo’ until his dying day, a legacy his wife Maude took-up after he was gone. The Alloways’ story centers the white hero, the repentant slaughterer, but their attempt to squeeze the tale into a white supremacist mold taints every anecdote. Every use of the word half-breed makes me want to erase him from the record, to banish him and his lies from this story, and to focus on James McKay instead.

James McKay, the Metis forefather of modern Winnipeg. The Honourable James McKay, speaker of the first legislature; translator and negotiator for treaties One through Three and commissioner for Five and Six. James McKay, the stout

22 In a story dictated to S. Helena Macvicar, for inclusion in the records of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Maude Alloway stated, “it has been said that to Charlie Alloway should go the credit for the preservation of the buffalo in Manitoba for if it had not been for his foresight years ago, the American bison would be but a misty vision.”

23 McKay aided Alexander Morrison in negotiating Treaty Six with the Cree Nation at Fort Carleton. There they used the nearing extinction of the bison as leverage to get leaders to agree to a cession of lands and withdrawal to reserves. Local leader and eventual great chief Pitikwahanapiwiyin (known by settlers as Poundmaker) responded, “this is our land, it isn’t a piece of pemmican to be cut off and given in little pieces back to us. It is ours and we will take what we want” (Dempsey). Despite opposition from prominent leaders such as Pitikwahanapiwiyin and Mistahimaskwa (known by settlers as Big Bear), Treaty Six was eventually signed, in some cases years later, by nearly all the Cree Nations in Alberta and
trader and guide with the piercing grey eyes, who once carried Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, on his shoulders across muskeg swamps (Stephen, 19).

Alloway tried to use his white body to obscure all 300 pounds of McKay’s Scottish/Cree body, but he won’t succeed in this telling as he has in so many others... But of course, Alloway’s words are the ones that survive in the colonial record. So he will, in parts, be our narrator. When the telling is drawn from his words it will look like this. Be on your guard, I have the distinct feeling he and his wife are not to be trusted. But then again, what do I know? Maybe I shouldn’t be trusted either, what do I know?

In early 1873 McKay and Alloway drove their oxcart down the deeply rutted mud streets out of Winnipeg to meet up with a convoy of eighty to a hundred Metis hunters on their way to the Battleford area of Saskatchewan. Led by Pierre LaVeille, the hunters and their families were searching for Bison to slaughter for hides and pemmican. They found a herd on the Southwest bank of what is now the North Saskatchewan River.

As it was the tail end of winter the party undoubtedly pursued a matriarchal band of cows and under three-year-olds. The grandmothers, mothers, and aunties would have chosen this place because of its large meadows, rich with rough fescue, buffalo grass, and freshly greening sedges; so important when the other plant life was barely waking from winters grip (Chapman 984). Just emerging from the patchy remnants of snow, these grasses provided for the nutritional needs of the pregnant, while the wooded banks and small ravines that meandered off the river provided shelter (Olson, Portraits 34). I wonder if the hunters came upon the herd unaware; placidly grazing but always on alert,

Saskatchewan. Later, Mistahimaskwa and Pitikwahanapiwiyin would be imprisoned with these bison and their descendants at Stony Mountain Penitentiary. Interestingly, Battleford, the location of the first capture of bison was still sovereign territory in 1873. They signed onto through adhesion in 1878 (Dempsey).

24 “Alloway certainly lied, or conveniently mis-remembered his prominence in these events. I have found no mention of him in any of the early reports. I don’t believe Alloway was a ‘man about town’ at that time, so I would certainly guess he went along as a paid helper, with many others that just didn’t happen to get rich later in life” (Private communications Dr. Randall Mooi, Curator of Zoology, Manitoba Museum). Though it is not possible to do it here, in subsequent texts I hope to draw a connection between the loss of the bison, the resistance of Mistahimaskwa and Pitikwahanapiwiyin, the establishment of the ‘immaculate grid,’ and the Alloways’ rise to wealth and power through trading in Metis scrip. I am particularly interested in how all these forces coalesce under the roof of the Manitoba Museum.

25 Original Cree name of this area is “Sakicawasihk” (Private communications with Battlefords Agency Tribal Chiefs Community Organization).
mothers with increasingly adventurous young calves often calling and awaiting the gentle, grunting response of “here I am”. Were McKay and Alloway so stealthy that they could approach them and hear their huffing breath and loud tearing of grass? Or did the black tailed prairie dogs that make their homes beneath bison feet sense the approaching danger? Did their sentries, peering over grass shorn down by tearing bison teeth, spot them? Did the change in their chattering chirps alert the vigilant cows?

Regardless, they stampeded as the first round of bodies fell. Brown headed cowbirds took to the sky, their piercing liquid chirps and trills drowned out by hooves and bellows as they abandoned their posts on the bison’s backs. That first volley of gunfire was coordinated to optimize the number killed before the stampede began. Dozens fell. Still, dozens more were on their feet when the men reloaded. The women and children encamped at a distance from the action heard what they couldn’t see: “a sound deep and moving like a train moving over a bridge...a continuous, deep steady roar that seemed to reach the clouds” (Billy Dixon (1874) qtd in Flannery 319). Up close to the carnage, McKay and Alloway would have felt the anguished guttural calls of mothers resonating in the cavities of their chests. The cows were the prey these hunters sought, their flesh was more palatable than the males, and their hides would have been in their most desirable state if they came upon them before the spring molt had begun. But this meant the next generation of bison were in their bellies, and their deaths meant there were that many less to replace them. The few that had been born early that year would have blended even more completely with the red-brown soil now that it was soaked with their kin’s blood.

When the selected cows had been brought down and the remainder driven off, the women were brought in to butcher and process the bodies. The calves lingered near their fallen mothers, watching from a distance as the women did their work. Further rings of hungry creatures circled this scene; wolves, swift foxes and coyotes awaited their turn on land while vultures and hawks hovered overhead. Woodpeckers and other small birds lingered in nearby trees, ready to feast on the insects that would arrive to consume what remained (Olson, Portraits 8).

Alloway’s characterization of this type of hunt indicates strange moralizing about the type of domination. He writes, “I have had my battles with the buffaloes [sic] also, I don’t mean on horseback, shooting them down on the run, as the wild-westerners were doing every day. That was not adventure, that was murder of the defenseless.” It seems the work of domestication, a sort of battle of wills, was the real battle for Alloway. This valorization of man’s conquest over nature through instrumentalization will undergird all the settler stories of the bison that follow, particularly that of Buffalo Jones.
As the azure glare of day gave way to pink, magenta, and then purple deepening into black, three remaining calves were driven away from their mothers’ bodies by these scavengers. They drifted towards the hunter’s fires. When morning dawned these “pitiful” creatures were run down or lassoed at McKay and Alloway’s command. The partners recognized even then that the current rate of slaughter could not be maintained. So, they sent Feladoux Ducharme to Prince Albert for a domestic cow. When he returned, they succeeded in forcing an adoption of two bulls and a heifer, who thrived once they got accustomed to their new mother. It took them all summer to bring the orphans in from the western plains to James McKay’s estate, Deer Lodge, on the Northwest fringe of Winnipeg.

In April of the following year the pair struck West again with a similar convoy. It took them a month to find any bison. The metis hunters undoubtedly familiar with the general rhythms of bison movement found them west of the Milk River, halfway between Regina and Moose Jaw near the international border.

As the weather warmed and the rains fell, the bison matriarchs had led their daughters and nieces southwest to the moist mixed prairie where the high protein grasses would tolerate their heavy grazing. Here most of their calves would have been birthed and the new mothers would have broken-off for a few weeks into nursery bands. The herd was weeks from making the move en mass to the south, where the blue gramma grass would draw them onto the dry mixed prairie and into closer contact with bachelor herds and older bulls who would engage them in the intricate dance of rutting, tending, and breeding (Brower 21).

This band, however, wouldn’t make it to the breeding grounds that July. Like the previous year, McKay and Alloway were able to capture three orphaned calves: a bull and two heifers this time. Unlike the previous year, however, not all the calves took to their forced adoption. The young bull rejected, or was rejected, by the domestic cow they brought. He grew sick and weak and died on the journey home. Alloway doesn’t describe the hobbling and binding that must have occurred for these surrogates to take to one another, but this violence is present, if unremarked, in his statement, it is exceedingly difficult to make the calves take to a domestic cow.

27 The Milk River meanders along the southern edge of Alberta and dips down into Montana just before Saskatchewan’s western border. This geographical description makes no sense at all, since Regina and Moose Jaw are closer to the Saskatchewan/Manitoba border.
These five freeborn calves survived and reproduced, but their relationship to the land and the people they coevolved with died. They were kept at Deer Lodge in summer and wintered in Baie St. Paul parish along the Assiniboine River.

When the last of the Canadian plains bison were being slaughtered in 1878, Alloway sent out a hunter who brought him back the hides of thirty bison from just south of the Pembina Mountains.

In February of the following year James McKay’s wife Margaret died. McKay followed her in December.

Alloway claimed that he made the greatest mistake of his life when he sold all his tangible assets, including the now 13 bison, to go into banking with his brother. Lamenting, we cannot see distant things from the all absorbing present sometimes.

What a strange lie. Even from in front of my computer screen, one province, and 95 years away, I can catch him in it.

With an electrified thrill, I find this advertisement from the front page of the Manitoba Free Press on January 2nd, 1880. Up for auction on Tuesday, January 20th, 1880, were numerous horses, other livestock, household furniture, sleighs and a “band of 13 splendid Buffaloes and other curiosities”. Alloway was not the owner, nor the seller of the bison. In fact, his only connection to the auction was as a buyer. A subsequent article from the Free Press on January 20th attests that C.V. Alloway purchased the 5-year-old Kentucky bred, chestnut thoroughbred stallion “Shekle” for fifteen hundred dollars.

In reflecting on the establishment of Buffalo National Park at Wainwright, Alloway said, the animals will increase under natural conditions of peace and contentment. Every one of them came from my original group of three heifers and two bulls.28

28 Both parts of this statement are false. The first represents the failure of the settler mindset, for whom success was to control the bison as a resource in managed isolation. The second is the failure of a man to see how thin his ‘hero’ disguise was and how it could not hide his efforts to portray all non-white actants as “supporting cast[e].” Winnipeg punk band Propagandhi coined the turn of phrase “supporting cast[e]” for the title of their 2009 album. The cover of this eloquent powder keg of an album features the painting The Triumph of Mischief by Cree artist
Kent Monkman. In the title song, Chris Hannah sings, “When the credits finally roll for this, the worst story ever told, don’t bother sifting through the names for yours or anyone you know. Unless they were by chance a shepherd king, a virgin birth, a resurrection, a messianic prince or some such childish thing…. I think we can safely guarantee that there will be no revisions to the script made on behalf of a supporting cast(e). Because history exalts only the pornography of force – that of murderers and psychopaths.” Alloway attempted to assure his name is in the credits by inserting himself in the archives as a ‘saviour’ figure. My project of writing back against “the worst story ever told,” differs from the bleak vision that comprises the bulk of this (specific) song. Instead, it enacts what I have come to know as hopepunk, a sincere and earnest demand for a different story, one that stridently reframes strength in relationship, connection, and empathy. I believe Propagandhi also attempts to make “revisions to the script.” For example, in songs such as “Mate Ka Moris Ukun Rasik An,” Hannah contrasts his experiences as a sheltered and self-involved teenager on the prairies and the harrowing story of Bella Gahlos, an underground resistance fighter and defector from East Timor. The song begins with a recording of her speaking at one of the band’s benefit concerts for East Timor. It is but one of many examples of how Propagandhi has spoken from their own experience and made space and supported the voices of others, particularly racialized women.
In the early hours of a frigid spring morning, a bison cow removed herself from her small herd.

Her mother would have sought a secluded place to calve, possibly a site used by generations of cows. Like that of important trails and seasonal migration routes, knowledge of such places had been passed from one bison to the next for as long as there were bison (Olson 19).

But this was 1880, and this expectant mother was corralled at Deer Lodge, an estate on Winnipeg’s outskirts. The tawny newborn was born onto trembling legs. His coat had evolved through centuries of connection with the changeable prairie grass, though now he needed little protection from wolves long driven from the area. The calf, still wet with afterbirth, had barely taken his first tentative steps when his herd, now fourteen in number, was roused from slumber by men sent to drive them to their new home at the stone penitentiary.

The calf and his relatives had been sold when their original benefactor/abductor, the honourable James McKay, had died. It is a testament to how remarkable the sight of bison were that in 1880 eight hundred people attended the auction that determined the fate of just fourteen. Remarkable, because the bison were once so plentiful here, that at a distance, they could have been mistaken for a brownish-black churning river surging across the plain. Auction day was a festive affair, and attendees filled the estate and spilled out onto Portage Avenue. Some attendees sought the bison for meat, others would have shipped them as far as Europe, and into private zoos. Many were just there for the spectacle of seeing the last of their kind. The winner of the auction was Samuel L Bedson, the British born warden of Stony Mountain penitentiary (Edwards 38).

And so, not long after the February sale, and only hours after that small calf’s birth, the bison were herded the 58 kilometers north across hard open ground to Stony Mountain.
I realize that the name, Stony Mountain, might form a misleading mental picture for those who have never seen the prison as it still stands, with its front façade looking much as it did on that day almost a century and a half ago. Imagine a sea of flat, uniform ground where the wind whips wildly on a painfully bright February day. On top of a sudden swell in the land sits a three-story sandy brick building; dozens of elegantly arched windows peering down upon you, the bars not discernable from a distance. It has since grown many transecting arms off the original building, and a domed cupola has sprouted from its center, but that first view you have of it when you drive down highway seven, that's what those fourteen bison saw.

Our newborn's mother may very well have been one of the free born, drawn from her mother's body near the banks of the North Saskatchewan River only five years before. In comparison with that first march, this leg of the forced migration is paltry. Most importantly, our rapidly maturing calf has something his mother did not, the insistent grunts of her matriarchal family all around her; a call and response of 'here I am' that eases the stress of being herded.

It took 36 hours to reach Stony Mountain, and upon completing the journey, the fourteen bison promptly escaped and made a beeline back to Deer Lodge on the north-west edge of the city (Markewicz 17). They didn't stop until they got there and had only a few hours respite before their drivers caught up with them and drove them back to the penitentiary.

Born early into deep snows, the newborn calf was unharmed by the trek, even though "no domestic calf could do one-quarter of that at the same age" ("C.V. Alloway" 13).

The bison were often corralled in a stone pen near the farm on the prison grounds. This complex was nicknamed "the castle," and Samuel Bedson was its king. Unlike most of the other men involved in 'saving' the bison, Bedson was no great hunter. He was a collector. He regularly attempted to domesticate wild animals for the amusement of his family and neighbours. The farm at Stony Mountain continuously housed a collection of wolves, deer, bears, and badgers, but Bedson's moose were local favourites; a pair had been trained to pull a handsome sled in the winter (Edwards 38). Bedson's daughter, Menotah, remembered when a similar trick was tried with a two-year-old bison bull.

It was Christmas afternoon, and his shaggy brown body was hitched to a toboggan for the amusement of the warden's guests. Eight merry makers loaded on the sled while five or six of the incarcerated men held onto a rope tied around his neck.

Imagine this ludicrous game of inter-species tug-of-war, the free laughing and playing while the prisoners, human and bison, were scared for their lives. A tense calm lasted for about fifteen or twenty minutes until suddenly and without
warning, the bull leapt into the air, scattering prisoners and guests in the snow. There was no catching him now that he had gained his freedom. Months later, Menotah's father received a letter from North Dakota that a young lone bull had been found grazing with an old rope tied around his neck. Bedson sent a hired man across the border to bring his property back (Edwards 39).

Menotah doesn't note the year of this escapade. Still, I can imagine it might have been December 1886. One of the unnamed prisoners might have been Mistahimaskwa, better known to colonists as Big Bear, the Cree chief and political prisoner who had been sentenced to three years at Stony Mountain Penitentiary following the defeat of the Riel uprising in 1885. Mistahimaskwa was initially put to work in the carpentry shop but was transferred to the barns after a few months, which he preferred. The loss of the bison, the starvation and disease that followed, had led Mistahimaskwa to resist the colonial government, and here he was, a lonely broken man, feeding hay to what was left of the bison in the Canadian West. Most of his time in the stables was spent looking after the pigs, a dirty and demeaning job, but the assignment allowed him to "get chummy" with two bears; his namesake and captives just like him (Dempsey 194). Mistahimaskwa's health had already begun to decline, and by January 1887, he was bedridden. Two years after being condemned to a three-year sentence at Stony Mountain, he was released so the government could be spared the embarrassment of having him die, as so many unnamed Cree, Salteaux, and Ojibwa had before him, in that hateful frigid place.

Mistahimaskwa was sent to his daughter Aski Iskwew at the Little Pine First Nation. There, she alone nursed him as most of his family had fled to Montana. He lingered for many months in a cabin just west of where the first of Bedson's bison had been captured.

In December of 1887, remarkable news reached the fading Mistahimaskwa; four bison were sighted near Lake Manitou. His son Imasees had once lamented, "there will be no buffalo in the other world, for they all have been killed and their bones scattered to the four corners of the land" (Dempsey 194). Yet, these four remained free, and so Mistahimaskwa was able to pass away peacefully in his sleep on January 17th, 1888, with faith in the Great Spirit, and believing that there would be buffalo waiting for him in the green grass world on the other side (Dempsey 197-198).
Fight or Flight

We are grazing, hidden in the breaks between the sand hills.  

We are always alert, our ears panning for the sounds of men, their horses or wagon wheels.

I find my body orienting itself toward the wind, waiting for the hated odor that twangs my fraught nerves and triggers our flight, yet again.

I don’t want to leave this sequestered place. The snow has just melted from its protective slopes, moistening the thirsty earth below and reviving the short scrubby grass after a long winter rest.

There are so few of us now. I used to feel comforted by the nearness of my sisters, and they by my attentive calls.

My shepherding of their young when their new claves arrived.

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29 Archives contain what can be said within discourse, and discourse forms and is formed by ideology. In this section, I employ Buffalo Jones’ records to expand upon who can have a voice in the archive, thereby undermining the anthropocentrism inherent in the chronicling of bison conservation. Indeed, this work of ‘fictocritism’ employs empathy to recenter the more-than-human voice and ironically uses the observations of the bison’s tormentor to move beyond a simplistic anthropomorphic representation.

30 “Fourteen buffalo were hiding in the breaks of the sandhills [sic]. This was a sequestered locality, where man rarely penetrated, and where the grass was green, as the snow had drifted on the sides of the divides and moistened the earth, thereby giving vegetation an early start” (Jones 203).
There are so few babies now. We cannot let down our guard to breed as we used to. Two lame bulls follow us but they barely have the energy to register when we are in estrus.

When we do conceive our bodies can no longer nourish the unborn. We are haunted by those stolen from us. The mothers that aren’t killed fighting off the snatchers return again and again to the site of their loss.

We have learned that our bonds no longer protect us, but draw the men to us, so we scatter ourselves even further at the slightest disturbance, leaving only our tracks to betray us.

The earth has been dry so long. There are fewer bodies to wallow in the earth, so there are fewer places to hold the little water we have. We return to the old ones. We smell the soil, cracked and hard. We scent the lingering musk of urine and bodies and know before we reach them that they hold nothing for us.

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31 “The bulls were very poor and shaggy” (Jones 204).

32 “They had been prospecting over a great range of country in northwestern Texas, and luckily had located two small herds of buffalo, one of which comprised two bulls and twelve cows” (Jones 203).

33 “A pathetic sight was sometimes witnessed when the mother of one of these families was killed at the first shot. They were so devoted to her that they would linger, and wait until the last one could easily be slain. Often have I so crippled a calf that it was impossible for it to follow, and its pitiful bleating would hold the family until I could kill all desired. Should the calf be wounded in the fore or hind parts, the old cows would actually support the part so crippled, and it would walk away on the normal parts by such aid” (Jones 234).

34 George Millward McDougall, a Methodist missionary and founder of the McDougall Residential School in Alberta purportedly recorded a Blackfoot law that “Not one buffalo is allowed to escape. The young and the poor must die with the strong and fat, for it is believed that if they were spared they would tell the rest, and so make it impossible to bring anymore buffalo into a pound” (McDougall 282).

35 “The buffalo were scattered to the four winds, and hide away in deep caños [sic]. They instinctively know their doom is sealed. How differently they appear from those of old… They now keep their sense of sight, smell, sound and feeling wrought up to such a tension that they are often gone before we have discovered their presence, only their tracks remaining to betray their former haunts.” (Jones 202).

36 “It appears there has been no rain in this desert for years past” (Jones 202).
It is dim and rain drizzles as the night lifts. A sweet and pungent dusty balm rises from the earth as soil and plants drink in the long-awaited moisture.37

My body is alive with these sensations, and I don’t detect them until they are amongst us, and then I am frantic with fear. We scatter and gallop in every direction, but the knowledge in our blood draws us back together again and we bolt towards the wind.38

They are still at our backs.

We cannot stop moving.
We might still outrun them.

The bulls cannot keep up and drift away, but these men are not enticed by weakness the way wolves would be. We strain every nerve to escape.39

Night settles and they keep pressing us. The sun rises again and they are still there. Three nights and days they keep at our heels.

Our bodies are made to go without, but still the strain of forsaking even a drink of water begins to take its toll.40

I am leading my sisters when I scent them.

Urine and sweat and dead skin wafts towards me on a breeze exhaled from a canyon mouth. I turn and lead some of my sisters and their young onto an open prairie. 41

My instincts have betrayed me, betrayed us.

37 “The day broke dark and drizzling” (Jones 204).

38 “We routed the shaggy beasts early, and never were animals more surprised. They were terribly alarmed at our unexpected presence, perfectly frantic with fear and began to stampede in every direction, but they soon joined the main herd.” (Jones 204).

39 “Nearer and nearer he approached the frightened little brutes, which now seeing they were pursued, strained every nerve to escape” (Jones 204).

40 “The bulls were very poor and shaggy, soon dropping out, leaving the twelve cows, which by the third day of the chase became so gentle we could ride within two hundred yards of them without any difficulty.” (Jones 204).

41 “On that afternoon, as we were passing the mouth of a canyon, five immense cows and three baby buffaloes winded us, and dashed out into the prairie, much to our astonishment and delight” (Jones 204).
A man and horse gain on us and I can taste my terror. I hear the oscillating whistle of a lasso and then the grunting desperate cry of a calf. I hear him fall. A thud, thud thud, and dragging and scraping.\textsuperscript{42}

The galloping of the horse’s hooves still sound behind me. I don’t dare slow to look until they stop. The man is on top of the little one.

Her mother has rushed on and can’t stop to whirl on him in time, and in an instant, he is back on his horse pursuing us. His rope finds another of our young and pulls him down, but now we know what he is here for. My sister turns to save her calf at all costs. She is a blur of bristled hair as she charges him, but there is a crack of thunder, and mushrooming from the deafening sound is the acrid smoky rotting smell of water that cannot breathe. My sister staggers a few strides from the source of her pain and sinks to the earth.

Disoriented by the sound and smell of death I barely register the hum of the rope when it strikes out and brings down our last baby.

Three of us manage to escape together and avoid the men for a few days. We search for our lost kin, scenting the air and ground in our incessant movement, but they are lost to us.

Our bodies hum with an uncomfortable heat as we shelter at the base of a small hill.

Our tormentors appear suddenly and without warning over its crest. I am rooted; trembling and paralyzed where I stand as a cyclone of horses and dust descend on me. One of us, who I don’t know because we move as one now, breaks the trance of fear and runs. We are all flying. Again, our blood guides us against the wind, the dry dirt rising behind, trailing us and cloaking our escape. But still, they gain on us, and then there is a ridge in front of us and we veer as one to follow it.

My sister is in front of me, another behind. The last of our band. And then a sweating, heaving horse is at my shoulder so close he grazes my bristled hair. I cannot escape him and my muscles flood with the message ‘attack.’ I pivot on

\textsuperscript{42} Jones’ employee Lee Howard captured this calf. Jones describes the hiss of his lasso as it gained momentum, “its velocity increasing as he gained on the soon to be captives. Gracefully it shot far out in a beautiful curve and coiled around the neck of the calf in the lead, although it was hugging its excited mother’s shaggy shoulders” the calf “tumbled in a heap.” The horse galloped past him and the calf “began to dangle like a rubber ball on a string” (Jones 205).
my quaking back legs and drive my practiced horn into his side. He staggers away from me and then I hear over my rushing blood the whirling trill of the rope. The man’s arm moves in an instant and the rope strikes at my leg like snakes I have trampled. All at once this rope closes around my leg. It constricts and snaps my limb in place. And then I am falling, my body turning over and over as it has never done before. Ground, men, horses, sister, my senses reach out for them, but they are a tumbling confusion like my body.

Something closes around my hind foot. My legs are being dragged apart, my body stretched painfully, exposed.
Terror.
Terror.

Another man is on the ground nearing me. My feet must find the ground. They cannot so I thrash at him with my horns, but prone I hit only my own sides. Pain rattles my ribs and I scent blood. I must dash him with my loose hoof. I slash again and again, but he evades me. A burning is filling me from the inside out. My legs become heavy and slow. He slips something cold around my striking leg. What is this? It is hard and bites and pulls at my hair. Now he is trying to trap my back leg too. I fight with the last of my desperate strength, but his rope finds my free leg and draws it close to its prone fellow. He pulls and shakes the rattling trap.⁴³

He leaves me. He is back on his horse. The ropes stretching me now relent. I kick and roll in my binding and get my hooves under me.
I rise.
I breathe hard. Every follicle of hair is charged with my anger. My fury has kept me alive. I charge at them, but I fall hard. Again. Again. Again.

I cannot fight. I try to run. I fall hard, but the ropes slip from my feet. The heavy hard trap does not.

The men ride by on their horses, leaning low to the ground, retrieving their ropes. I am beyond caring now. The pulsing energy that had fueled my fight is ebbing now. I hear horses’ hooves retreating. I stand so still, my breath a struggle to gain.

⁴³ Coming upon a group of cows with no calves Jones decides to hobble one as an experiment. He used two 2-foot-long chain hobbles with heavy buckled straps on either end. The cow he singled out tried to fight back when Jones approached her to fasten the hobbles, she “struck at [him] until her ribs rattled, as her head pounded her sides in her fruitless efforts to reach [him]; then she used her loose foot kicking and striking until she was actually exhausted.” (Jones 215).
When the scent of the men dissipates my sisters return to me. They are wary of my hobbles but sense my distress.

They lead now, and I follow. My thirst is so overwhelming, my body so hot under my shaggy coat.

In summer I would roll in a cool dusty wallow, made for me by generations of my kin. But I can’t lie down here. I am afraid I won’t be able to rise again. Besides, this heat is burning from the inside out.

We don’t make it far, and I don’t smell what I long for; the cool, verdant, dusky smell of water. My tongue hangs dry, black, and swollen from my mouth.

It is growing dark. We try to keep moving but my haunches are drooping down, and the burning is in every part of me. It is bright, vivid, and constant.

The pain is mercifully starting to dull in the dark, but I feel it pooling hot and liquid around the squeezing at my hocks. It itches under my skin, tight and inescapable.

Recently reintroduced bison have uncovered significant remains and artifacts, demonstrating an inexplicable hereditary connection to place.

In 2018, Leroy Little Bear, Amethyst First Rider, Paulette Fox, and other Kainai First Nation elders and community members partnered with Parks Canada to return bison to the Panther Valley in Banff National Park. These bison quickly rediscovered trails and wallows that were hundreds or even thousands of years old. Manager of the reintroduction project Karsten Heuer describes the bison as “revisiting many of the areas their ancestors did… [and] reactivating them.” In at least one instance, the reintroduced bison revealed the skull of one of their ancestors who had been killed at least a century before (Reiger).

Bison also came home to the Wanuskewin Heritage Park, near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 2019. In 2020, bison wallowing in a new range revealed four petroglyphs in the hoofprint tradition, a metaphorical representation of animals through elements of their bodies. The first petroglyph discovered was carved into a 250-kilogram boulder. It bears “the carved grooves of ribs called a Ribstone, which is associated with the bison hunt” (Selkirk). Another larger stone was found with a grid pattern, which usually represents an out-of-body experience associated with vision quests (Selkirk). While the area had been subject to extensive archeological work over the past 40 years, it was the bison’s bodies that revealed these precious and sacred connections to place. Wahpeton Dakota Elder Cy Standing says of the discovery, “you know, we don’t really know our history. We have oral history... but all the books were written after contact. [The petroglyphs] show us more. We had a good life. Our children need to know that so they can go forward” (qtd. Selkirk)
My mind goes blank for a while, and then I don’t know where I am, but I scent my sisters still nearby.

Urine flows from me, the first release since my chase and capture. It smells wrong, dark, and bloodied.

The darkness lifts but my eyes are dim.

My head is bent low to the earth, and I cannot lift it. I am dimly aware of scavengers following me. Waiting.

My legs stiffen. They will not move. They jerk in spasms and the bonds bite into me. Shocks like lightning crackle and shoot through me.45

I fall.

Nothingness.

The world enters my awareness again. I breathe in the earth, the renewing grass, my sisters. I will my head up, but it barely shifts on the dusty ground. The whirring of my blood in my ears grows fainter and slows. My body is growing quiet. It creeps slowly. The absence of feeling is shocking after the burning that plagued me.

The darkness draws over my eyes, ears, nose.
I...

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45 “Capture myopathy is a pathophysiological manifestation where the inherent biological stress defenses of an animal have failed or are in the process of failing… It is believed to arise from the inflicted stress and physical exertion that typically occur with prolonged or short intense pursuit, capture, restraint or transportation of wild animals… Clinically, the animal usually presents with a combination of any of the following signs: lethargy, muscular stiffness, weakness, incoordination, recumbence, partial paralyses, metabolic acidosis, myoglobinuria and death… Macropathology typically reveals muscle necrosis, dark red-stained renal medullae and dark-coloured urine.” (Breed et al. 2).
Some people would have you believe that Charles Jesse ‘Buffalo’ Jones got his nickname for his conservation efforts. Please don’t believe them.

I’m not surprised that this fable is often repeated; Jones was an excellent PR man and a coauthor of his own mythology. When he succeeded in life, it was because of his powers of persuasion. But when he failed, it was inevitably because ‘nature’ would not be convinced.

First, it was the idea of Osage orange bushes. Like Jack with his magic beans, Jones arrived in Kansas in 1866 with a bag of seeds and a promise of a dense, quick-growing hedge that would allow homesteaders to corral their livestock and keep undesirables out. Osage orange was “a red-hot scheme” in a land where no trees grew hardy enough for fence posts (Easton 10-11). Jones’ bag of seeds grew into a nursery until a plague of grasshoppers thwarted his plans, and the advent of barbed wire in 1875 made rebuilding a moot point (Fisher).

His next sales pitch was for Garden City in 1878. It wasn’t a city at all, but four buildings in the middle of Western Kansas’s hardscrabble high plain. He sold the idea of this new ‘Garden of Eden’ to railroads and homesteaders, and they came, lured by false-front commercial buildings and transplanted trees (National Register 4). He willed this city into existence.

The false-front buildings burned to the ground in a devastating 1883 fire (National Register 4). In 1886 a blizzard killed 75% of the cattle in the region, droughts followed, and the railroads folded under the weight of their over-expansion (National Register 5). It was in the eye of the storm, after the blizzard of 1886 but before Jones’ financial ruin, that he began collecting bison calves in earnest.

But Jones got his nickname nearly two decades before he ever ‘rescued’ a bison calf, in 1876 when he was a hide hunter (Easton, 24). And while Jones was
a prolific buffalo hunter, it wasn’t just his abilities to slaughter buffalo that distinguished him as the Buffalo Jones.

Charles Jesse ‘buffalo’ Jones got his name for murdering people.

As far as I can tell, the origin of Buffalo Jones’ name begins with Tu-ukumah, a Comanche leader, who guided his starving people through a snowstorm to escape their imprisonment on the Fort Sill reservation. After losing two cavalry troops that pursued them, Tu-ukumah and his people made their way to their traditional hunting territory at Pocket Canyon. They hoped to find some of the dwindling buffalo; instead, they found a white hide hunter named Marshall Sewall, who set up a stand in the canyon. He was picking off a herd one by one. He had killed twenty-one bison when several Comanche men put a stop to it. A few days later, fellow hide hunters found his body ringed by the bloated and untouched bison corpses (Easton 25).

The indignant white hunters organized their revenge (Easton 26). Forty-five of them descended on the Comanche families. By this time, the Comanche band had been joined by an Apache band, swelling their numbers to approximately 300. Despite their numerical and tactical superiority, the Comanche and Apache fighters could not contend with the high-power buffalo guns. Jones, along with his comrades, picked them off from the slopes of Pocket Canyon.

Jones was well-practiced; this was how he had taken down hundreds of bison. As he wrote in his memoir, he would shoot the matriarch of a herd from three hundred yards; her devoted kin “would linger and wait until the last one could be easily slain.” Or he would wound one of their young so that it would cry to its family, desperate and plaintive, holding them there until he could “kill all [he] desired” (Jones 234).

By the hunters’ calculations, they killed thirty-five Indigenous people and wounded twenty-two. When the carnage was over, the white hunters toasted one another around the campfire. One man “lifted his tin cup of whisky toward [Jones] who had been most responsible for the day’s success… Here’s to Buffalo Jones!” (Easton 27).

The first time he was called ‘Buffalo Jones’ it was because he had killed humans the way he killed bison.

46 Tu-ukumah was also known as Black Horse and Pako-Riah (Colt) or Ta-Peka (Sun Rays) amongst his people (Anderson).
II. Jones’ crusade to ‘save’ the bison was fueled by a drive for atonement and domination, both of which were rooted in his Christian fundamentalism. Please understand me; he did not regret his murder of human beings, but rather he regretted his contribution to the near extermination of the buffalo. This is the only sin he laments in his memoir, which was undoubtedly, yet another of his PR efforts.

Jones believed that there was no place for wild bison on their former ranges. Man’s mastery transformed these arid tracts into productive farms “made exceptionally fertile by the manure, bones, and flesh of the millions [of bison] which [had] lived and died there during centuries past” (Jones 259).

And so, like the land, being made useful under domestication would save the bison. It was an edict sent by God in Genesis 1:26; “Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness; and let them have dominion over ... all the earth and over every... thing that creepeth upon the earth” (King James Bible).

47 Jones admits to murdering multiple Indigenous people in his memoir, though he brags that no one will ever be the wiser because he didn’t keep trophies of his crimes. A sentiment blatantly undermined by his confession. This was a man with little perspective on his own motivations or actions. He justifies his killing by comparing his victims to dangerous animals. His relationship to animals was clearly intertwined with his white supremacist worldview (Jones 84).

48 It is important to note that it is colonialism’s foundational misconception that North America was a place of unmanaged ‘wilderness.’ As settler ethnobotanist Nancy Turner points out, “the biological character and diversity of North America bears the indelible imprint of long-term Indigenous management and stewardship” (5). Because this management did not follow the same logics of domination and extraction as the European model, it was “ignored or downplayed by colonial governments and settler society” (Turner 5). Eliding Indigenous stewardship was integral to the Doctrine of Discovery, which was laid out in a series of Papal Bulls in the 1400s (“Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery” 2). Essentially the Doctrine of Discovery, or terra nullius as it is also known, claimed that because there were no sovereign nations occupying these lands, they could be claimed for Christian Monarchs; it codified a “perceived right of conquest” (Woolford et al. 9). The Doctrine of Discovery was followed by the doctrine of vacuum domicilium which was established in 1692 by the governor of Massachusetts Bay, John Winthrop (Turner 14). Winthrop claimed that because Indigenous peoples failed to subdue the land through intensive agriculture, they had no civil right of possession. We can see the logics of terra nullius and vacuum domicilium at work in Jones’s claim to the bison, and his treatment of them thereafter. While both Jones and Indigenous peoples practiced management regimes that were “deeply embedded in their belief systems,” Indigenous management throughout North America “reflect[ed] an ethos of responsibility for other lifeforms and natural entities that provide for the needs of humans – lifeforms that are sentient and have agency, requiring gratitude and reciprocity in response to their generosity” (Turner 9).
The 1886 blizzard that triggered the collapse of Garden City also inspired Jones’ bison domestication scheme. Jones noted that “the snow was twisted and hurled into the air leaving the ground bare, where it was completely pulverized by the energy of the contending elements into an impalpable powder, filling the lungs of everything animate…alternately melting and freezing until horses, mules, and domestic cattle perished by tens of thousands” (Jones 48). Domestic cattle were particularly vulnerable to winter storms. On the open range, they would turn their tails to the punishing winds and drift away from them, trudging on, never stopping until their last breath. On a trip to the Texas panhandle, Jones traveled through massive fields of frozen carcasses, but there were no bison amongst the dead. This realization inspired Jones. He thought he could create a hybridized race, hardy enough for the American climate but with European stock’s temperament.

And so, Jones set out to capture the last remaining remnants of the great southern herd, not as some noble conservation effort, but as breeding stock for his grand experiment.

III.

On the first three expeditions, he took only calves. He learned as he went, and the bison he encountered suffered considerably for his mistakes.

He brought two mules on his first foray, a thoroughbred named Kentuck, and cans of condensed milk. Four of the fourteen calves they led back to Garden City died along the way. They couldn’t survive being force-fed the poor substitute. Jones and his two assistants shot three cows; two in the process of taking their calves from them, and one without a calf they killed for food.

I will repeat some, but not all the graphic details here. I won’t let Jones use me to repeat the misery he inflicted. His writing feels like a perverse recitation of suffering orchestrated to illustrate his mastery. I couldn’t breathe while reading his accounts, not because they were exhilarating and suspenseful, but because his descriptions of mothers and calves desperately clinging to one another knocked the breath out of me.

Twelve milk cows accompanied the men and horses on the second hunt in 1887. Despite their efforts not to repeat the mistakes of the past, seven calves died on this expedition, three of them before they even began the trek back to the ranch; the hunters captured these first calves before the milk cows caught up with them. The calves refused buckets of water and called relentlessly and desperately for their mothers. Jones and his men rode out looking for range cows to forcibly milk, but instead found two of the bison mothers wandering the site of their loss. Their udders were full; I feel the echoes of that aching pressure. I feel it because I have known that itching, tingling letdown, and the pain when the release doesn't come. I have felt the surge of hormones that hit like a drug when the baby feeds, sometimes when I just thought about the baby feeding.
share those hormones with these cows. They don't make my connection to my child any less, but they make my empathy with these mothers real. Jones could never understand the bond of milk. It was just another resource to take, another inconvenience to overcome.

Jones shot one of them for meat and milked her dead body.

The men rode back to camp, the canteen of milk bouncing in the back of Jones’ wagon. After two hours in the punishing sun, Jones was driven to drink the milk. But nothing would come out. It had churned to butter.

When they arrived back at camp, they feasted on her roasted body, salted the butter, and enjoyed it on warm biscuits. They devoured her while her calf looked on, his tongue “black and swollen” hanging from his mouth, his groaning grunts continuous and hoarse (Jones 141-142). The surrogates arrived in time to save some of them. Seven made it to Garden City.

The third hunt in May of 1888 was the most 'successful'. Thirty-seven calves made it back to Garden City. Three more died of stress, heat, and dehydration. Two were left hogtied when darkness fell. Wolves probably ate them (Jones 185).

The fourth and final hunt in 1889 is remarkable for its protracted and futile cruelty.

Jones recognized that the behavior of the few remaining bison had changed. It was now a challenge to find a herd of twenty-five, where in the past there would have been hundreds, particularly in summer breeding congregations. Unsurprisingly, there were few calves; only seven were found on this final expedition. Recognizing this would be his last effort, Jones resolved not to leave any bison on the plain.49

Jones and his crew found a herd of twenty cows and a bull at the Palo Duro River's headwaters. With horses and bloodhounds, they were able to drive them for four days to their base camp.50 In this panicked state, the bison would not

49 The Chicago Times recognized the significance of this ‘final hunt’ and furnished Jones with Carrier pigeons. The birds carried news of Jones’ efforts back to Garden City, where they were telegraphed on to the paper. ibid 202

50 Capturing and herding wild bison had been practiced for centuries by Indigenous nations, particularly in the northern range. Driving bison to jumps or pounds required knowledge of trails, topography, and seasonal grasses. The practice necessitated intimacy with animals. “Decoys,” men or women embodying a bull or calf, would imitate calls and movements to draw bison in, while "bison runners" who knew the ways of wolves would start a stampede and control its
stop for water, and eventually, their exhaustion made them manageable. But there were no trees here to create a corral. Jones had experimented with hobbling a cow earlier in the trek, but she had died "of a broken heart" shortly thereafter (Jones 222). Jones chalked this failure up to the bison's obstinacy, assuming that wild adult bison preferred death to captivity and appeared to have the "power to abstain from breathing" (Jones 223).

This 'failed experiment' may have given Jones some misgivings about his mission.

While his men kept the cows in sight and under control, Jones rode back to Garden City, rounded up twenty-five of his domesticated bison, and drove them 200 miles to meet their conquered kin.\(^{51}\)

Unfortunately, Jones devotes only a sentence to this meeting. He writes, "They all appeared to enjoy the occasion as much as if they had been exiles and had been reunited on their native soil" (Jones 221).\(^{52}\)

When I read Jones' description of the two herds meeting, I reach out between the words for all that was left unsaid. As if I can reach back through time and space.

It seems that the draw of their domesticated kin was not enough to override the blood knowledge of place passed down through generations. The wild bison balked at their territory's northern limits; they turned back to the land they knew. Jones' men followed the herd continually for forty-two days and nights. Desperate to circle them back, they charged the cows at least twenty times. The bison became thin and footsore. The men could often follow them by "the blood left in their tracks" (Jones 222).

\(^{51}\) Amongst the twenty-five may have been some of the Stony Mountain bison, which had survived the harrowing conditions of the first live-bison train journey in 1888 (MacEwan 85).

\(^{52}\) There is no "as if"; they were precisely exiles reunited on their native soil. But how did they know one another? Did they smell and hear in one another echoes of themselves? Had they or their ancestors met when breeding congregations came together? Did tightly bonded females find lost herd members? Lost calves? We can never know. Jones knew the power of these blood ties, knew that after a stampede, herd members would find and know one another by scent and sound, and would "never rest until they [were] all together again" (Jones 234). In that moment, however, Jones was zealously focused on possessing the last of the Southern bison, and it seems he did not note any specifics.
It seems there was nothing the bison could do to escape their fate because Jones had already decided God had ordained it. Despairing, Jones returned to his plan of hobbling the adult bison. They singled out, lassoed, and hobbled seventeen of the cows. Eight died within the first twenty-four hours, suffering seizures, stiffening limbs, and then collapse (Jones 222). Still, the men pushed on, and the rest fell on the trail to Garden City one by one. Seven of their calves survived to witness their deaths, though I don’t believe they were permitted to linger, lowing at their sides.

Capture myopathy was not identified until 1964, when it was diagnosed in another endangered species, the Hunter's hartebeest. The stress of being captured triggers the creature’s biological defense mechanisms, and the prolonged or intense engagement of these mechanisms causes massive and often fatal system failure. The animal suffers lethargy, muscle weakness, incoordination, rapid breathing, shivering, dark red urine, and hypothermia. They suffer from metabolic acidosis, their blood turns to acid. Their muscles, especially in the hindquarters, suffer necrosis. Their muscles die as the animal is still struggling for life (Breed et al. 2-4). This is how the last of the Southern bison died.

Jones' desperation in capturing these last cows may have been his final grasp at controlling the future. He had endeavored to create a bison empire; he had tried to sell the world on a new, hybrid, subjugated species. But his breeding program produced mostly sterile offspring, and few could stomach the months of dangerous and brutal training it took to ‘break’ a bison. And even when the bison appeared broken, the handler could never let his guard down; given the opportunity, the bison would kill the man who sought to control him. The bison would never be truly domesticated. 

*Jones sold his herd in 1893* (Markewicz 23).

Jones published his autobiography in 1899 when he was lobbying for control of the bison at Yellowstone National Park. He was awarded the post of game warden in 1902.
Search for Facts

The search for facts goes in circles.53

I find a fact and follow it back to its source, only to find it’s from the same poison well. Every new telling is contaminated. They repulse me with their rotten sulphur smell.

Who first brought the bison back to the Flathead Reservation and why? The white men who told this story only understood bison as property. There must be a story not told by, or for, white settlers. One that understands bison as the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d’Oreille peoples do, as kin.

Thirty years after the bison’s arrival on the Flathead Reservation, a white trader named Charles Aubrey inserted himself into history by recording his story for Forest and Stream, a magazine that promoted the burgeoning conservation movement. Here is an abbreviated version of that story, in his words:

In the year 1877, I was located at the Marias River and engaged in the Indian trade…My post was called Ft. Custer…

Among the Pend d’Oreille Indians who made up the hunting party from across the mountains, was an ambitious, bright, middle-aged man – of the warrior class, but not a chief – whose Christian name was Sam.54 He was known to the Blackfeet as

53 A few years ago, I was at a gathering with fellow artists Adrian Stimson, Michael Farnan, and Lori Blondeau. I told them about my quest to track five bison and their descendants as they were shuffled around North America. Adrian remembered a guide they worked with in Alberta who told a story that diverged from the settler’s tale. In this telling, a Blackfoot man called to the bison, and his wife helped carry them over the mountain on their horses. I knew a story that held more truth was out there, so I kept pushing to find it.

54 Sam will be referred to in different accounts as Samuel Wells, Indian Sam, Samwel, Walking Coyote, and Samuel Walking Coyote.
Short Coyote... I often met Sam in the way of trade and he indicated more than ordinary friendship for me, caused by my fairness in trade.

My interpreter for the Blackfeet was a three-quarter blood Blackfoot, Baptiste Champaigne... Baptiste’s wife was a sister of Yellow Wolf, a Blackfoot warrior... She had a niece whose name was Mi-sum-mi-mo-na, and being a rather comely girl, had attracted the attention of Sam... Sam made propositions to her kinsfolk...that he be permitted to marry Mi-sum-mi-mo-na, and offered for her sixteen head of good horses. The offer being very tempting, she became his wife. A short time afterward Baptiste gave me the story of the affair. I told him very frankly that he had made a mistake...I said to him; “You are a strong Catholic and your Church does not permit polygamous marriages.” By the rules and laws regulating marriage among the Pend d’Oreilles, Sam was punishable by both fine and flogging...

Sam’s Pend d’Orielle wife was very much opposed to his second marriage and appealed to me to talk with him...In the course of time Sam’s first wife made so many objections, and so continually quarreled with him over his second marriage, that there was no peace in the family.

By early spring (1878) feelings had risen to such a condition that Sam shot and wounded his first wife. It was a flesh wound in the shoulder. She was still asserting the rights of a Christian marriage... Conditions were such that the Blackfoot wife...found life in Sam’s lodge unbearable.

In the course of a few days, Sam...called on me...I signed him to sit down...I reasoned with him in the sign language...I told him he had made a mistake, but there was time yet to make it right...I said to him “When do you cross the mountain to your people?” He informed me that... he wanted to go, but he feared he would be punished by the fathers of St. Ignatius Mission...I thought there was still a chance to make peace with the soldier band of his tribe by getting a pardon from the fathers...I would assist him by giving him a letter to Father Ravalli, stating that he (Sam) was not a drunken or lazy Indian. I also suggested that in connection with my letter he make a peace offering to the fathers, in the hope that it would lighten the punishment...I then suggested...he rope some buffalo calves – now nearly a year old – and hobble them with my milch [sic] cows...and then give them as a peace offering to the fathers at the mission. He looked at me with
surprise and doubt. I then showed him that there were no buffalo in the Flathead country, I thought the fathers would appreciate the gift. He at once agreed to try my plan...

Next day I made a visit to his lodge and found him and his Pend d’Oreille wife hard at work and both in a very pleasant humor. I asked in sign language of the wife, “Where is the Blackfoot woman?” She informed me in a very serious manner that when the Blackfeet had broken camp, her people had taken her away...

Sam was successful on his first hunt and soon drove in two fine calves...nearly yearling buffalo. The heifer was loose, the bull side-hobbled... Sam rested a few days after his first trip; his wife joining him in telling me the story of the wild chase and the fierce struggles with their captives...

He returned at the end of eight days with five young buffalo – two bulls and three heifers. Each buffalo was head and foot hobbled... Each bull was dragging a long lariat so as to be easily caught for night picketing... Sam told me he worked hard like a white man, as he expressed it – the rope skinning his hands many times... He told me of killing one heifer, which he would have liked to save. She had a very bright fine coat... In snubbing he gave her too much rope, and in the fall, which came an instant later, this fine heifer’s neck was broken.

His wife advised him to quit now... she did not like the signs brought out by the death of this fine animal...

Sam herded his buffalo with the milch [sic] stock for five days, resting and making arrangements for his trip across the mountains... On Monday he bade a cordial good-bye... Sam brought up the rear, the buffalo following the pack horses. The three bulls were head and foot hobbled, the four heifers loose; seven head in all is my recollection of the bunch... I afterward learned... by some accident... one bull had died... I also afterward learned, through Indian sources, that immediately upon his arrival upon the reservation he was arrested and severely flogged...

In the course of time I heard of Sam’s death... passing away peacefully in his lodge or cabin. His wife followed him some time after (11).
This primary source, written thirty years after the events related, sets out the narrative for all the accounts that follow—every telling cites Aubrey as a source.\textsuperscript{55} In a preamble to the article, the editor of \textit{Forest and Stream} notes that

\begin{quote}
It is important to judge this telling and its credibility within this timeline:
\end{quote}

\textbf{1855} – The confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes signed the Hellgate Treaty ceding title to the majority of their lands to the United States government with 1.3 million acres reserved from cessation for the Flathead Reservation. This territory was to be protected for their “exclusive use and benefit.” They also maintained the rights to hunt, fish, gather, and pasture animals on their ceded lands (Smith 13).

\textbf{1870s} – The final Pend d’Orielle hunt brings in only 7 bison.

\textbf{1877?} - Łatatí brings in 6 live bison calves to the Flathead reservation. The same year the federal government banned the sale of guns or ammunition to any Indigenous person in Montana (Bigart 15).

\textbf{1904} – After years of bitter protest by tribal leaders Theodore Roosevelt signs into law the Flathead Allotment Act in violation of the 1855 Hellgate treaty. This law forced members to take individual parcels of land, opening the remaining lands within the reservation to non-Indian homesteaders. “In all, over half a million acres – the vast majority of the most productive and valuable land of the Flathead Reservation – were lost from tribal ownership. Proceeds were used to fund the “Flathead Indian Irrigation Project” which largely benefited white farmers. (Smith 16-20)

\textbf{1906} – The herd on the Flathead reservation, owned solely at this point by Michel Pablo, is sold to the Canadian government. It takes five years to round them all up. (Distant Thunder 23)

\textbf{1907} – Aubrey publishes his account of ‘Indian Sam’ in \textit{Forest and Stream}.

\textbf{1909} – The American Bison Society, headed by Theodore Roosevelt, convinced congress to seize 16,000 acres of the Flathead Reservation to form a National Bison Range. As with the funds from allotment, the dictated payments for the land went back into the coffers of the US government. The bison range was seeded with bison that trace their lineage back to the Flathead’s original six. For a significant part of the National Bison Range’s existence tribal members are barred from working there.

\textbf{1990} – The confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes applied to assume management of the National Bison Range under provisions of the American-Indian Self-Determination Act. They have been fighting to enact “a modern manifestation of the very old tribal commitment to take care of bison, who have taken care of the people from the beginning of time” (Smith 21-22).

\textbf{2021} – After thirty hard-fought years the National Bison Range, and management of the bison there, is returned to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. CSKT Chairwoman Shelly R. Fyant said in a statement to Char-Koosta News “The restoration of this land is a great historic event and we worked hard to reach this point. This comes after a century of being separated from
Aubrey claimed he "made an effort to get together one hundred calves, this effort was postponed a few years too long for it was not until the year 1883, at which time the buffalo were finally destroyed."

I do not think that it is only through the lens of a 21st century reading that the flaws in the story are legible.56

I am relieved that at least Aubrey allows Sam to die peacefully in his home.

As I search through the archive, other tellings of Sam's story resurface in my consciousness. I can picture a photograph: Michel Pablo and Charles Allard are standing; Samuel Walking Coyote is sitting, and in front of him is laid a blanket with 25 piles of gold. They bear the death masks of indistinct 19th-century faces; hats pulled low, just above their dark smudged eyes. I recall a caption that tells me about a rabbit that ran by in the middle of this transaction, and all three men jumped up and chased after it. Luckily when they returned, the treasure was still there. I can find no record of that image anywhere, but I cannot shake the feeling that I have seen it, somewhere, on this long search for truth.

I've nearly given up when I find it, a written account,57 in a book I hadn't even taken notes from because its author, Sheilagh Ogilvie, spoke in a voice so repugnant, with its racism oozing between every word. She writes:

______________________________
the buffalo and the Bison Range, and after a quarter-century-long effort to co-manage the refuge with the FWS (Fish and Wildlife Services)."

56 The Foucauldian perspective helps one see that the archive is not a transparent store to recover histories from (Ballantyne 90). These stories, and their preservation in the dominant archive, were always already discursive. Discursive texts are not neutral transmissions of facts; rather, they are born out of and support ideology. In this case, that ideology is decidedly white supremacist and colonial. The relationship to white supremacy is most blatant in the racist stereotypes used to describe Samuel Walking Coyote. Still, it is also more subtly coded in the paternalistic relationship Charles Aubrey describes with Samuel and in the very fact that Samuel’s voice is wholly obliterated from the text. It is important that we view the settler narratives collected in this section in connection to the mobilization of state power that was occurring in tandem with them. Eliding Indigenous perspectives, responsibility, and agency in these land and resource management stories naturalizes the wresting of sovereignty and self-determination from tribal nations. This circular relationship between discourse and politics is what Foucault called power-knowledge. By compiling and reframing the narratives in this text, I am creating a counter-archive that makes explicit the discourses and ideologies at work; not to vilify individual characters but to critique systems of power that I am myself implicated within. This dissertation, and this section in particular points to the fact that archives “serve as tools for both oppression and liberation” (Caswell 1).

57 The photograph seems to have been a mental invention.
The story goes on to say that Walking Coyote was determined to be paid in “real money.” The two businessmen and Coyote met by a stream on a fine autumn day to make the exchange. Bills and coins in piles of one hundred dollars were being counted out and placed under paperweights of stones, when a squirrel or a mink ran by. Business was forgotten! Allard and Pablo chased after it. When they returned, breathless and concerned, they found Walking Coyote still brooding silently over the gleaming piles of wealth. Walking Coyote went straight off on a $3,000 binge. He ended his days under a Missoula bridge two years later, completely broke. A less-than-heroic exit, but one that matched the spirit in which he had lived and captured the calves that were now prospering on the rich grasslands of the Flathead (26-27).

The words sit like bile in my mouth. But where did the story come from? Did she invent it? I wade deeper into newspapers and websites, and then I find its source, in a Christmas edition of the Winnipeg Evening Tribune:

Walking Coyote insisted on having actual money; he refused to accept a cheque. Allard and Pablo were busy counting out the greenbacks into piles of $100, each of which was placed under a stone, when they saw a mink. Instantly Walking Coyote and both the ranchers went after the mink, and for some minutes forgot the piles of money, to which they hurried back, to find it safe, with a lone Indian looking at it with covetous eyes (4).

This was written in 1922 and signed only “Old Timer.” Note that there is no mention of Walking Coyote’s death. Ogilvie wrote her book in 1979 for Parks Canada. She couldn’t resist spitting on the memory of Walking Coyote. There are no citations, but I find a name I recognize in her bibliography, George D Coder. His 1975 dissertation is the earliest mention I have found of Walking Coyote’s death. He writes

[His] good fortune proved the undoing of Sam, however, for shortly thereafter his body was found washed ashore under the Higgins Avenue bridge in Missoula. His death is attributed to the results of a drinking spree (22).

His only source seems to be an article by Ellen Nye. Nye wrote her piece in 1933 for the Montana News Association Inserts, a company that sold filler for Montana newspapers. No record of this article remains. Coder’s dissertation was accepted, and Walking Coyote’s legacy as a drunk, wife-shooting, greedy Indian became further entrenched in the dominant archive.
How far did this contamination spread? Did its effluent disperse into the consciousness of Walking Coyote's kin and community?

I have found a strange book that offers a glimpse into some of the stories passed around the Flathead Reservation in the early 20th century. *I Will Be Meat for My Salish* is a collection of interviews conducted by settlers employed by the Montana Writers Project. This New Deal initiative, led on the Flathead Reservation by Bon I. Whealdon, began in 1935, contracted unemployed (white) white-collar workers to catalogue the state's history, and part of that history was the tale of Samuel Walking Coyote.

I want to record here the words of Chief Mose Michell, but please remember that Whealdon's hand recorded them before me, another outsider with his own biases and ignorance. These are not transcripts; we will never honestly know the weight of Whealdon's voice. Chief Mose Michell's wife acted as interpreter, so she may have chosen words that the recorder would have been able to hear.58

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I know that Samuel Wells, whom the whites called "Indian Samuel," brought four calves...from the other side of the mountains. Several times I went to see the calves...Our old Pend Oreille [sic] and Flathead Indians were very pleased that we had buffalo in our country, as the herds across the mountain had been killed.

I had heard some old Indians tell that once our tribesmen had been angry with Samuel because he took as a wife a woman not of our nation. Samuel then left us and went to Sun River. He was there several years. Then he became lonely and unhappy because he could not come home. His wife told him, "Samuel, the buffalo your people love will soon be all gone... You capture what calves you can, and take them to your people. When they see them they will be very glad, and they will forgive you that you married not one of their women"...Now Samuel's woman was smart...so Samuel did as his wife told him.

When the Pend Oreilles [sic] and Flatheads heard that Samuel and his woman had brought back buffalo calves, they were

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58 In the Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, Michel Foucault writes, “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations” (129). Whealdon was governed by the laws of his archive, as I am governed by the laws of my own feminist, anti-racist theoretical framework.
happy and made a feast for the Samuels. My father, Chief Charley Michell of the Pend Oreilles [sic] arose and talked to the people, saying, "Our brother is back with a gift for us. Now, we shall bring gifts to his teepee" (106-107).

Another tribal member, Que-que-sah, remembered a day from his childhood when "Samuel Welles" whom the white people called "Indian Sam" rode through the village of St. Ignatius with four buffalo calves draped over the backs of his pack ponies. He recalled that

they were rather small. One in particular was very young and weak...As we gathered about Sam while he was unloading, he told us how he acquired the calves. He had traded with other Indians (I believe he said Piegans) for the three older ones. The youngest had been given to him by a Piegan, its mother had been killed and it was too young to eat grass. Sam had managed to save it by feeding it with milk from a pack mare that had lost her colt. I heard that he taught the bull calf to suckle the mare, but I do not know if that was a true story (107-108).

Even here, I wonder if the tendrils of Aubrey's story have made their way in. The first section of this book, written by Whealdon, is devoted to recounting the "official" narrative. So, did the interviewers seek out those that would corroborate it? Or did the keepers of deeper cultural knowledge withhold it for fear of contamination?

Pend d'Oreille Elder and historian Mose Chouteh would have been 50 when Whealdon had come calling in 1941. He waited until 1978 when he was 87 years-old, to record the story of Ataticeʔ, his son Łatałî, and how bison returned to the Flathead reservation. Here I will let Mose Chouteh's words speak for themselves, as I did with the settler writers I recorded above.⁵⁹ I hope, in giving elder Chouteh the last word, I handle his account with respect and lift it up above the putrid mire of the others.

I leave you with the narrative that should replace all others because it is the one told and retold by Sam, Ataticeʔ, and Łatałî’s kin.

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⁵⁹ Colonial archives “produce knowledge about the other, but don’t contain knowledge by the other” (Kausman). By including Mose Chouteh’s story in his own, albeit abridged and translated words, I am attempting to highlight their absence in the dominant archive. When this dissertation is accepted the University of Western Ontario will add it to an official academic archive. In some small way, its inclusion will deny the erasure of Ataticeʔ, Łatałî, and reveal the racist coding of Samuel Walking Coyote that has been perpetuated for over a century.
That is, by the bison’s kin.

Listen everyone I am 87 years old. While I was growing up I heard this told by many elders…I heard this story from many of them. This one story I’m going to tell you. It is about a man called Ataticeʔ.

[While on a hunt several buffalo followed their camp] And so in the evening, [the men] went into the tipi. The chiefs were smoking. One of the chiefs said, “Hello, Ataticeʔ. Is there something that you come for?” Ataticeʔ said, “Hello. I have come to ask you, my chiefs. I think that it would be good if we took these buffalo back to our land to live there.” Some of the chiefs said, “that’s exactly right.” And some chiefs said, “No. Because it is good that we come here to ‘play’ with these different tribes. We come here to make war with them. And we come here to gather food. And we come here to relax and pass the time. For all three reasons, it is good that we come here, and if we take them back to our land, we will be tied down, it will be tiresome for us. We will not be able to go anywhere. We will just be in one place as we gather our food.” The chiefs disagreed with each other. Half of them said yes and the other half said no. [After three days the council remained at an impasse and out of respect for the tribal need for consensus on major decisions Ataticeʔ withdrew his proposal].

As he mounted his horse, he made sounds, saying “Qeyq, qeyq-eeee.” He waved at these buffalo, like sending them to different parts of the prairies. Ataticeʔ said to the buffalo, “It’s pitiful that we were denied for you to follow me back. It will be up to each of us whatever happens to you and whatever happens to me. That is all.” And all these buffalo turned towards the east, the rising sun. It’s like they were going off forever in different directions. The people were crying as they came on. As they were coming up the long range of mountains, they looked at the buffalo again and already they were far away, the great black forms of the buffaloes. They were going away. And Ataticeʔ cried.

Ataticeʔ’s son Łatatí having the same deep connection to the buffalo as his father, renewed his father’s request to capture calves in the 1870s. The council, seeing the effects of the unchecked settler slaughter of the buffalo, approved Łatatí’s plan. Six calves were brought over the mountain range, they soon flourished and became twelve. Łatatí’s mother,
meanwhile, remarried Samwel Walking Coyote. While Łatatí was away, two people went to see Samwel. One was called Charles Allard, and the other man was called Michel Pablo. These two men met with him and told Samwel, “we’ve come to buy your buffalo.” Samwel said, “ok, it will be so.” Maybe it was two days later, maybe later, Łatatí returned to his house and missed the presence of the buffalo. He looked around and all the buffalo were gone. When he got home, he asked his mother, “where are my buffalo?” And his mother told him, “Your stepfather sold them,” And Łatatí cried.60

60 This transcription is taken from a short film produced by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes titled, “In the Spirit of Atatice?” This film conveys so much more of the cultural and historical context than I can or should attempt here. Please go and listen to Mose Chouteh and learn of the unbroken relationship of care and reciprocity the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d’Orielle people continue to fight for. https://youtu.be/S1WvkSN8zDQ.
Blood Memory

Rail travel for bison was perilous. Extraction from the land was violent.

The only recorded death during the transfer of bison from Kansas to Montana was a calf who was trampled to death in the stifling, shifting, rattling cars.

In my imagination, the calf is still a reddish caramel colour, she is not yet weaned.

Was she with her mother? Had her mother been born into captivity on Jones' ranch, or was she dragged by lasso from her own mother’s side? I know that somewhere in her matrilineal line a cow fought a man to keep her calf and probably died in the process.

The egg that became my daughter existed in my genetic code when I was an egg inside my mother. What of my mother’s trauma is playing out in her body? We are white and we are privileged but I have seen enough of the shadows of violence that haunt us to know we haven’t escaped gendered inter-generational trauma.

Did this trampled calf carry that memory in her bones? Did her mother listen to the imperatives of her instincts and keep her calf close? Did her own feet bring her calf’s death?

I do the math. Jones’ bison arrived from Kansas in 1893.

Michel Pablo’s bison were sold to the Canadian government and began being swept off the land in 1907.

I doubt that same cow—the one whose calf had been trampled—would have been alive with a calf in 1907. But her daughter might, or her granddaughter.
How does this kind of trauma make its way into genetic material? After all, they say a butterfly has sense memories carried over from its caterpillar self, even though it basically becomes a gooey soup of cells in the chrysalis (Webster). I imagine the phantom call of these memories, of a calf falling under shifting panicked feet, echoing in the body of another cow who died fourteen years later—shortly after being loaded onto a wagon train on the Flathead Reservation.

The twenty-five or so cowboys who had loaded her into a reinforced wagon separated her from her calf. The little one was further down the caravan of horse drawn carts. He grunted and called to his mother.

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61 Here, I am musing about the power of epigenetic inheritance as a conveyor of what Indigenous traditional knowledge systems recognize as ‘blood memory’ (Unreserved). Epigenetics studies the effects of environmental factors on gene expression. Epigenetic changes do not alter the genetic sequence itself but can be inherited by offspring (Paul 1). Thus, epigenetics can result in a devastating legacy. For example, Anishinaabe psychiatric researcher Amy Bombay has been studying the effects of epigenetic pathways caused by residential school trauma (Unreserved).

Epigenetics is a way of envisioning the self as continually, relationally constituted at the most fundamental level. There is no essential material self; our “epigenetics implicate social stimuli and exposures as inducing epigenetic alterations” (Paul 11). In his Ph.D. dissertation, Wade Paul describes epigenetics as a confirmation of the “Haudenosaunee concept of seven generations of stewardship,” which “connects the actions of individuals today with the health and well-being of seven generations later” (11). Like Paul, I see epigenetics as a potential site for decolonization in the sciences. In addition, I view it as a confirmation of the theories of material semiotics, a confirmation as powerful as it is timely. We must develop ethics of responsivity, one that “begins by reimagining our literal inextricability from that which we are called to respond” (Niemanis 563).

Epigenetics are also fertile ground in the realm of decolonial critique. The postgenomic era, the time since the completion of the sequencing of the human genome in 2003, has seen an increasing uncritical acceptance of biological race by the general public (Meloni 4). This ideological construction of race as hereditary and essential (hard-heredity) and not a social construct has been shored up by the commercial genomic sequencing industry, personified in corporations like 23andMe. Where discourses around hard-heredity essentialize race, epigenetics proposes a “soft-heredity” where the genome is a reactive mechanism “whose borders with the environment are increasingly porous, and almost impossible to establish” (Meloni 5).

Epigenetics are essential for understanding humans and bison as porous beings, formed not only by the “longue durée… of evolutionary time” but also the “micro-history made of local and extremely recent events, such as… stress exposure or psychological traumas” (Meloni 7). This is especially interesting to consider in light of recent moves to cull and breed our way to a ‘genetically pure’ bison, in an attempt to resurrect pre-colonial contact bison. Epigenetics seems to point to the danger of such a narrow and fixed understanding of bison.
I know the sound of the cow/calf call and response—the rumble rising at the end when either is particularly insistent. But I have only met bison going about their usual daily interactions in a protected park. I have no frame of reference for the desperate and panicked plaintive call that cow heard.\textsuperscript{62}

The call of her offspring drove her into a frenzy. In desperation she rammed her horns through the two inches of wood that imprisoned her.

The crates were well built, reinforced to withstand the force of a 2,000-pound bull.

Her horns became lodged in the wood and in thrashing against it she broke her own neck.

She was butchered, and her hide sold.

I don't know what happened to her calf.

I do know that nineteen others died in the round up. Seven hundred and eight were shipped off the Flathead reservation. Six hundred and fifty-three made it to the ill-fated Buffalo National Park. Fifty-five stayed at Elk Island National Park and founded a herd there. As far as brutality and waste and cruelty go, this round up has nothing on Buffalo Jones’ ventures, but it was still violent and costly. Five horses were gored to death and many more were ‘ridden into the ground.’

Was it necessary? Was it inevitable?

As a Canadian settler, it would be so easy for me to rush to claim a position of innocence, to say the government that represents me saved these bison. That’s what my government has been telling the world for over a century: that these bison were “saved” from destruction through Parks Canada’s protection.

The outlines of this story hold up if you stand very squarely within your settler identity—if you embrace Parks Canada, the protector of Canada’s natural and cultural heritage, for your enjoyment, as your inheritance.\textsuperscript{63} But refocus your

\textsuperscript{62} As I write this, I think about looking for a video of calves being taken from dairy cows but decide I can’t face it.

\textsuperscript{63} The National Parks Act of 1930 states that the Parks system was established for “the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, subject to the provisions of this Act and Regulations, and as such Parks shall be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Though the act was amended in 2000, and the Parks mandate now includes provision for the “ecological and commemorative integrity of these places”, the sentiment of an enshrined inheritance persists in the cultural consciousness,
gaze and shift your perspective. You will see this legacy myth is only a thin shroud over the complicated tangle of colonial realities that brought these bison under colonial control.

Tribal members had brought bison to the Flathead Reservation in an act of stewardship and conservation. These bison were allowed free-range on pastureland that was held communally by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. There they thrived for decades, multiplying until over seven hundred grazed the valley south of Flathead Lake. The bounds of the reservation and the tribal authority there protected several generations while the US military and hide-hunters eradicated the bison outside the reservation. The Salish model of care was working.

Old bulls would sometimes stray off the reservation, and Michel Pablo or his ranch hands would drive them back. Pablo wanted to avoid conflict with his white neighbours, and when Pablo could not keep one bull within the reservation, he had him shot. When the old creature was butchered and skinned, they found that these neighbours had filled his tough, battered hide with all kinds of buckshot and .22 calibre bullets.

In 1904, after years of bitter protest by tribal leaders and in violation of the 1855 Hellgate treaty, Theodore Roosevelt signed the Flathead Allotment Act into law. This law forced tribal members to take individual parcels of land, opening the remaining lands within the reservation to non-Indigenous homesteaders. With the arrival of white farmers and ranchers would come more fences and guns. The bison needed to be saved from federal American policy, though many would frame it as an inevitable tide of white expansion. The Canadian government arranged to purchase and ship 708 bison from the Flathead Reservation to the ecologically disastrous Buffalo National Park near Wainwright, Alberta.

Maybe the old bulls were lucky; Pablo had a few dozen of the ‘Outlaws’ killed, butchered, and skinned on the land when they proved too large and “wild” to herd and load onto carts and trains. They were not wounded with buckshot by white settlers. They did not break their own necks in desperation.

and I would argue affects settler/Indigenous/more-than-human relationships to this day (Parks Canada Mandate). At Riding Mountain National Park, for instance, Okanese tribal member Wes Bone has been occupying a small portion of his traditional territory for over a year. His kin were violently driven from the park in 1936 to create a pleasing townsite for tourists (Sandlos 2008 189). In response to Bone’s occupation a local white summer resident, Darla Krupa, told the Brandon Sun "He’s barricading a good portion of that space and making everybody feel unwelcome," adding "What has changed? We’ve always gotten along" (LeTourneau).
Once installed at Buffalo National Park, these bison became emblems of federal conservation. Parks Canada’s bison, the descendants of those protected on the Flathead reservation, are still used to cleanse our collective image.

The stories we tell of settler-state salvation obscure Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d’Oreille efforts to protect the bison, their success in creating a pocket of free and thriving bison, and the violence and suffering that followed when federal governments wrested the bison from them. The colonial story of bison conservation is one of rescue. As Pauline Wakeham puts it, conservation narratives attempt “to overwrite colonial violence” and locate it in a distant past (21). The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation and many other signatories of the Buffalo Treaty are writing a new and yet ancient story, and it is theirs to tell. It is incumbent on us to find it.64

64 Through the Buffalo Treaty, Indigenous signatories seek to “honor, recognize, and revitalize the time immemorial relationship [they] have with buffalo” by “welcome[ing] buffalo to once again live among [them] as creator intended.” This inter-nation agreement differs from colonial conservation doctrines in many ways; it recognizes an essential cultural and spiritual nurturing between beings, it recognizes the buffalo “as a wild free-ranging animal and as an important part of the ecological system and environment,” and declares the intention to live with the buffalo so that they may, once again, “lead [them] in nurturing our land, plants and other animals to once again realize the buffalo ways for our future generations” (“Buffalo Treaty).
Numbers. They transmogrified breathing, eating, shitting, connected bison into numbers.

I’ve read the literature on the disastrous history of Buffalo National Park, and all I see are numbers. That’s what happens when a being becomes a commodity; he, she, they become interchangeable—just numbers.

20 to 60 million bison ranged North America before colonial contact. By 1888 there were 103 wild bison in North America. By 1912, 748 bison had arrived at Buffalo National Park from Michel Pablo’s herd. The estimated carrying capacity of the 583 square kilometres fenced preserve was 5,000 bison. By 1922 6,780 bison were sharing the limited resources with large deer, moose, and elk populations. The bison population peaked at 8,832 in 1925. 6,673 were shipped on trains and barges to Wood Buffalo National Park between 1925 and 1928. Over 19,141 had been slaughtered over the park’s 30-year existence.

Just numbers.

So let me try again. Let’s see if I can turn these numbers back into bison.

Herds of bison had continually moved through the Neutral Hills. The land and the bison had sustained one another.

The English name for this region reveals part of this relationship; some settler sources claim it was a borderland between the Blackfoot territory in the southwest and the Cree territory in the northeast, or in other words a no-man’s land “conveniently” devoid of Indigenous people (Brower 16). Still other settler
sources, which at least stem from “Native oral accounts,” describe the Neutral Hills as a “Sprawling, spiritually significant place where warring entities were forced to accommodate each other” (Colpitts 428). I am inclined to believe the latter, that this place of cooperation and Indigenous ‘management’ had emerged in tandem with bison land management.

Bison wintered here, and they compacted the arid land, helping it hold onto precious moisture. The reciprocity goes deeper though. These cows and bulls felt their way across the grassland, stems and blades tickling and poking their nostrils as soil stirred up by a roving muzzle and probing tongue was inhaled. I have seen this constant grazing and heard the sharp tearing of grasses. What I missed in such encounters is the more intimate interconnection between bison and the thousands of “microbes; fungi, bacteria, and protozoa” that populate each square centimeter of forage (Olson Prairie Grass... 68). This assemblage of microscopic life is specific to the plant the bison has just eaten and is essential to creating the right balance of microbial life in the first of his or her three stomachs. These microscopic beings have the enzymes to break down the cellulose in the grasses the bison eats; they could not live without this symbiotic relationship. As the seasons change and the bison follows a shifting mutually dependent pattern of vegetation, the microbes that coat the plants and soil do as well. And so, the ecosystem inside the bison’s stomach shifts with it. Of course, this microbial community is returned to the external ecosystem in the wake of the bison in what is euphemistically called a bison patty (Olson Prairie Grass... 91). Insects that consume the bacteria and protozoa continue this web of connections. Predators arrive to pick them out of the manure. They spread the fertilizer along with seeds prepared for germination by the journey through the bison’s digestive system. Reciprocity and movement that co-evolved over centuries enabled the sandy soil, dunes, and desert-like conditions of the Hills to sustain vast herds over the winter months. This dance of heavy winter use and spring and summer regeneration worked because a concert of reciprocity was performed by all the players.

Government surveyors and homestead inspectors saw none of this. They came looking for a home for the government’s newly acquired bison. What they saw was land that had no value because it could not be settled or farmed. It was worthless, but maybe it could be made useful by supporting the Dominion government’s newest investment (Brower 5).

This place, southwest of Wainwright, Alberta, became Buffalo National Park in 1908.

Like all investors, the government wanted quick and exponential growth. They converted meadows into hayfields for winter feed. The Park managers ordered riders to harass the herds daily, cutting out a few bison so that eventually they
would become desensitized and less combative when handled. In short, the men who oversaw the Parks Branch ran Buffalo National Park like a cattle ranch.

In 1914, a sex ratio based on a cattle ranching model was enforced, and old and unruly bulls were "disposed" of. In this way, bison such as Bolivar, a mature bull who "refused to be frightened, controlled, or subdued," were eliminated from the gene pool. It was thought the future generations, made docile through ‘unnatural’ selection, would be saved through domestication.

Killing the old bulls, however, posed two problems. First, taking out only old bulls wasn't sufficient to control the ballooning herd numbers. Second, slaughtering bison cost money, and the tough and gamey flesh of an old bull wouldn't bring in any income. The idea of selling taxidermied heads was floated, but it seems the head of a farmed bison, taken down by a park ranger, did not hold much cultural cache. Even these old giants' hides, which had once been used to justify the genocidal campaign that had driven the species to the brink of extinction, couldn't cover the expense of their deaths.

Park officials tried castrating the young to improve the palatability of their flesh, but still, profitability eluded the park. By the early 1920s, it was clear that at least a thousand a year had to be killed if the park’s resources were to support the herd. But by then, the toll of living in such crowded, degraded, and unsanitary conditions had robbed the bison's bodies of what little 'value' they had left. When split open, their stomachs were filled with twigs, and their bodies were scarred with Tuberculosis lesions. Three-quarters of the bison killed in 1922 were infected. Tuberculosis contaminates a mother’s milk and infects the young, but at the park, it was also transmitted when managers spread winter hay in the same spot day after day, forcing bison to eat from ground contaminated with fecal matter and, of course, the bacteria. Their bodies were condemned.

The land strained under the pressure of all these mouths and bodies. Grasses and other plants were grazed so short that they couldn’t produce seeds. Hillsides became blanketed with the silver shimmer of prairie sage, beautiful and fragrant but inedible to the bison.

The decision came down from the federal government to ship thousands of sick, starved bison to the newly established Wood Buffalo National Park. All warnings and objections were ignored. The government was desperate to deal with its ‘bison problem,’ and the move would be cheaper and draw less public outcry than mass slaughter.

The parks compromised with outraged biologists by declaring they would move only the young. They were considered less likely to have an active tuberculosis infection. That meant still nursing calves were taken and corralled away from their mothers; Nine hundred of them in the first shipment. Records show that the
park officials complained about the extra hay they required when otherwise they would have gotten all they needed from their mother's milk. Of course, this meant the park ran out of hay and substituted it with poor-quality straw bought from local farmers. 256 of the bison left behind at Buffalo National Park died in their cramped enclosure that winter.

And so, the young were sent north by a combination of rail and then 1120 km on specially constructed crowded barges. 6,673 in total. 1,634 in 1925, 2,011 in 1926, 1,940 in 1927, and 1,088 in 1928. “They were... released into unfamiliar habitat, with no traditions, no leaders and no experience with predators.” It is unlikely that more than 4000 survived their first year in the park. But in Wood Buffalo National Park, there were no outsiders to witness their ‘natural’ deaths.

Yet, still more bison were born than the land could handle, and so the slaughter continued. I wonder how they managed the thousands of dead bodies. I imagine they were driven through shoots and into corrals and shot. Not the ‘noble’ hunt colonizers had vested with so much meaning in the past. I’ve seen a later picture at Wood Buffalo National Park where a body is being pushed by a bulldozer to the abattoir. I suppose they used horses or a tractor in the 1920s and 30s. I am arrested by the fact that one of the few gaps in the slaughter came when the abattoir burned to the ground in 1935. The city of Wainwright begged the federal government for the funds to rebuild it quickly. Many of the men in that depression era town depended on the seasonal industrial-scale processing of bodies to meat. The money did not come that year, and though spared from the violence of slaughter, both humans and animals suffered.

Numbers, again; I, too, am doing it – I am reducing their lives to numbers. Let me try, one more time, to show you why their lives, and how they ended, matters.

Bison cow and calf herds are strongly bonded, social groups. Mothers break off with their newborns to form nursery bands during a relatively short calving season. The nearly identical caramel-coloured calves blend in with the dried, pale-brown plant life just emerging from winter dormancy but also with one another, making it harder to single one out.

Newly weaned yearlings form strong bonds that will manifest in loyalty, maybe even friendship, throughout their lives. ‘Spinster bands’ watch over their play.

They will defend one another against wolves and men, sometimes to the death.

They mourn one another.

Before mass slaughter, railroads, and fences bulls and disparate bands came together in summer breeding congregations, constantly moving to find enough resources for thousands of bison. The calves may look identical in another
species’ eyes, but a mother can pick out the sound of her calf’s cry from thousands of grunting young, and so a constant call and response can be heard. Even in this massive mixing of bodies, the calf/cow herds, connected by genetics and kinship, can re-form after the four weeks of the breeding season.

Distinct personalities and age determine leadership among the matriarchs.

Knowledge is passed down through blood but also through social learning.

This is what was decimated by the systematic slaughters and removals at Buffalo National Park.

First the old bulls, then the younger males, then mature cows, and by the 1938 slaughter, all they had left to kill were yearlings and two-year-olds (Brower 75). These young barely had enough meat on them to make their flesh sellable.

Today, some biologists and Indigenous leaders advocate for the elimination of bison contaminated with cattle DNA. They want to get back to a true and pure bison of the past, but I wonder if what makes a bison lies just in their genetics? Did the intensive and systematic destruction of bison lifeways change what bison are?

Wasn’t eradicating bison social order part of an effort to change them into something domestic? Less resistant to control because they were less bonded to one another?

With Canada’s involvement in World War II looming, Buffalo National Park was declared a failure. On December 30, 1939, the last bison were shot; untold numbers of deer, moose, and elk followed them to the abattoir. Once again, the Dominion government sought to make use of the now blighted land. Cleared of most of its complex, lively interactions, it became the perfect place to practice death. It became a Department of Defense training grounds and artillery range.

CFB Wainwright remains on the old grounds of Buffalo National Park. An ‘exhibition herd’ of around a dozen bison, brought over from Elk Island, currently reside in a paddock on the base. At the base’s entrance, signage bears the CFB Wainwright emblem; an impassive bison head, disconnected like a taxidermy mount from its body, corralled in gold maple leaves while an ornate crown looms above.
Dear Ron Hallman, Michael Nadler, Joëlle Montminy, and Darlene Upton,

My name is Michelle Wilson; I am a settler artist and mother. I have spent the better part of the last six years researching and creating artworks that reframe the stories settlers tell about the history of bison in Canada’s conservation system. I believe the way we tell these stories, centering on individual ‘white’ saviours, ignores harm and keeps us from envisioning how we could have done, and can do, conservation differently. I have been told by Parks Canada’s Mandate that as a Canadian I have inherited these lands for my “benefit” and “enjoyment.” But the more I learn about how we acquired and maintain the parks, the more I grapple with my responsibility for this legacy.

And so, as the heads of Parks Canada, I write to you with a critical request: Do not let the sun dawn on a second century of colonial violence at Wood Buffalo National Park. We are in a moment of reckoning; given the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Report, residential school graveyards, and the swelling Indigenous cultural and political resurgence, silence and ignorance are an inexcusable choice. To not step up at this time is to be left behind. I fear that if you do not hear this call now, this Land will not support the lives it was designed to protect in the century to come. I am writing to you because beginning this conciliation process requires an apology to those this Park intentionally excluded; the Dénéṣutinë (Chipewyan), Metis, and Nehiyaw

65 Thank you to Chloe Dragon Smith and Robert Grandjambe’s guidance on this section. They graciously spoke to me about their article, read my response and provided invaluable edits and suggestions. Many of the concrete suggestions for immediate actions came from our personal communications.

66 I learned my capitalization of Land from Dragon Smith and Grandjambe’s Briarpatch Magazine article "To Wood Buffalo National Park, with Love." They explain capitalization as a way to "convey its encompassing importance. When [they] speak of (L)and, [they] acknowledge that it includes People, Cultures, languages, and knowledge."
(Woodland Cree) peoples who have sustained it since time immemorial. In the wake of this apology, I charge you with demonstrating the sincerity of your words and support their guardianship of the Land.

Inspired by a vision of the future written by Chloe Dragon Smith and Robert Grandjambe, I have drafted suggestions for your apology. I took the truths shared by Chloe and Robert and expanded on them using your own records, adding the details and tools you will need to begin to atone. I hope you will read “To Wood Buffalo National Park, with Love” and sense its urgency. Chloe and Robert urge you to act now because we are at a tipping point; everything hangs in the balance, and it is time to choose where you will stand. You must do as Chloe and Robert suggest; make these words your own and carry them to the Mikisew Cree First Nation, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Fort Chipewyan Metis, Salt River First Nation, Smith’s Landing First Nation, Fort Smith Metis Council, Little Red River Cree First Nation, K’atl’Oodchee First Nation, Hay River Metis Council, Deninu Kue First Nation, and Fort Resolution Metis Council. You must stand before these communities and name these wrongs. Don’t be surprised if your apologies aren’t immediately accepted; you must back them up with transformational change and repatriation of Indigenous Lands.

Like you, I do not intimately know this Land; my suggestions are all drawn from the western archive, so they are just a starting place. When you go to these communities with your apologies, please listen without defensiveness to the hurt that this institution, and the people who continue to make it possible, have caused. You will undoubtedly find there is more to atone for.

Ron, Michael, Joëlle, and Darlene, I once believed the good outweighed the bad in Western conservation practices. But that was because I had been told through my language and culture that nature is something outside of us and that we cannot trust humans with it. To care for nature is to leave it alone.

But this Land was never empty, was it? I was wrong. We all need to admit we were wrong.

Harvesters and guardians have always managed this Land, but Canadian society, which we have inherited and benefited from, has been trying to erase their stewardship and knowledge for generations. Will you be part of ending this genocidal campaign? Will you open your eyes to what these communities have to teach us, namely, how to live well and in reciprocity with the Land?

In apologizing, you will cause pain and trauma to resurface. You must work with each community before, during, and after the apology to ensure that those hearing it are supported and cared for. This process must not leave people further harmed. Remember, this act of making amends is not to appease white
guilt. No one in these communities is under any obligation to make us feel better. Some things cannot and should not be reconciled.\textsuperscript{67}

Thank you, and please expand on the apologies and commitments that follow.

Sincerely,

Michelle Wilson

The Apology

1. I want to speak to you today about what we did. When I say we, I want to be clear I am speaking for many branches of the Dominion government and the people who ran them. Sometimes this ‘we’ refers to treaty negotiators, the Department of the Interior, or Parks Canada. I will not confine my apologies solely to the actions of Parks Canada because it is impossible to untangle my institution from others enforcing colonization and assimilation. The creation of Wood Buffalo National Park, like the establishment of colonial conservation regimes throughout the world, was an act of “ecological imperialism.”\textsuperscript{68} By not identifying which governmental department was responsible for what wrong, I hope to demonstrate my wholesale condemnation of this legacy.

2. Our predecessors made brief, prejudiced, and ill-informed forays into your territory at the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. Men like NWMP inspector A.M. Jarvis and naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton published racist, ignorant reports blaming your ancestors for the wood bison's decline. Jarvis and Seton’s easily disproven accounts set in motion the establishment of Wood Buffalo National Park, which was intended to dispossess and displace your communities from its outset.

In 1896 we, the Dominion of Canada, agreed with Indigenous leaders at Fort Fitzgerald and Fort Smith on a four to five-year moratorium on hunting wood bison. These leaders consented to the closed season because they were concerned for the survival of their kin, human and non-human. Your ancestors used traditional knowledge to conserve and manage resources since time immemorial, yet our ancestors ignored the complex ecological knowledge these

\textsuperscript{67} (Tuck & Yang 1)

\textsuperscript{68} (Sandlos Hunters at the Margins, 105)
knowledges held.

The ban on hunting bison between the Slave and Peace rivers south of Great Slave Lake has never truly ended. In 1899 the government’s treaty negotiators deceived signatories at Fort Resolution by telling them the government would not enforce the ban. We reneged on our commitments time and again. Instead of trying to understand one another better, we exploited miscommunication to deceive. We are sorry for our insincere communication with you, and we commit to working to regain your trust.

3. From Maxwell Graham’s first inception of Wood Buffalo National Park, it was to be a place that excluded Indigenous peoples, a place where Canada could extinguish treaty rights. We turned the possibility of exercising your rights and sovereignty into a privilege over which we had control. We used racial dogmas to determine who had hereditary rights within the Park, and we used a politics of purity to drive communities apart. Who was and wasn’t permitted in the Park separated families. We ignored letters pleading for groups and families to be reunited.

4. We armed police and then wardens to arrest and harass your guardians.

5. We particularly want to apologize to the kin of Francois Byskie, the first Indigenous person arrested for hunting wood bison. We are ashamed of NWMP inspector W.H. Routledge who scoffed at Francois Byskie’s claim of near starvation; for his sentence of 10 days hard labour, and Routledge’s theft of the bison’s meat and hide. 69 We also want to apologize to the kin of Pierre Gibot, Theophile Gibot, John “Mustus” Gladu, Joseph Wakwan, Joseph Pamatchakwew, Leo Pamatchakwew, Boniface Driscoll, Modeste Desjarlais, Joseph Desjarlais, Aimable Pamatchakwew, Leonard Packham, David Beaulieu, and Fred Gibot. We apologize for criminalizing harvesting bison, which we now recognize as an act of resistance and survival, but also for the life sentence of individuals being excluded from the Park. This sentence made an already precarious existence even more difficult for these men and their families. We want to work with you to make restitution for these wrongs.

6. We created a policy of surveillance and intimidation. Park administration met resistance to these policies with expulsion. Because the issuing of permits was at the superintendent’s discretion, countless other families were undoubtedly forced from their Land without trial or recourse. We intend to replace the system of superintendent control with communal

69 (Sandlos Hunters at the Margins, 65)
decision-making by consensus. Please join us in changing the balance of power on this Land. We want you to lead the way. We want to work with you, the descendants of the dispossessed, to move beyond access and towards true sovereignty on the Land.

7. When the Parks Branch assumed direct control of Wood Buffalo National Park in 1965, over four hundred individuals had recognized hereditary hunting rights within the Park, though many were not actively harvesting.\(^{70}\) We spent the first years of our stewardship arguing our legal right under Treaty 8 to exclude native harvesters from Wood Buffalo National Park gradually. We were not entirely successful, but we tried, and we apologize that we made your communities fight, yet again, for what was theirs.

8. When the United States Government stripped the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d’Oreille peoples of the Flathead reservation of their lands, we opportunistically bought their bison and called it salvation. Instead of making space for these plains bison to resume enriching ecosystems, we tried to harness their symbolic and financial potential by treating them like domestic cattle. The resulting ecological disaster embarrassed us. With the world’s eyes on us, we didn’t want to expend the political capital to carry out the mass slaughter of over six thousand bison. So instead, we rounded up the young, the still nursing, and the sick and sent them to your Land without consultation or permission from your communities. We knew many of the bison would die. We thought, ”The solution will be far from the public’s view there, far up in the North.” But of course, your ancestors saw it. So, we buried their accounts of thousands dropping dead in those first years.\(^{71}\) It shouldn’t have surprised anyone that wolf populations ballooned after we abandoned thousands of young bison “into unfamiliar habitat, with no traditions, no leaders and no experience with predators.”\(^{72}\) We responded to wolf proliferation by introducing poisons into your Lands. Our lack of care is inexcusable.

9. We saw the bison as an exploitable resource and used their bodies to save money. Our park wardens slaughtered bison one day and persecuted your hunters the next. Later, when moose became scarce (partly because we had prevented your Land management), we imposed hunting quotas. Still, we would not let you hunt bison within the Park. Even when we built abattoirs and killed hundreds a year, still we kept you from the bison. Our roundups were dangerous. 10% of the bison we

\(^{70}\) (Sandlos *Hunters at the Margins*,104)

\(^{71}\) (McCormack 370)

\(^{72}\) (Van Camp 315)
corralled died in the process. We thought our ways were best. We refused to listen or learn from you. We were wrong.

10. We recognize that by slaughtering bison within the Park and giving the meat to missionaries and Indian agents, we contributed to the residential school system and intentionally engendered dependency instead of acknowledging your right, established in treaties we signed, to hunt and practice lifeways on your Lands. Our complicity in supporting residential schools is unforgivable, and we will not forget the intergenerational harm it caused. We recognize that our attempts to exclude you from the Land and our government’s kidnapping of your children were connected tools of colonization. Assimilation and control were at the heart of both efforts. We must now put our efforts into supporting your work towards resurgence.

11. The best cuts of meat from the mass slaughters in the 1950s were sold south at subsidized prices, while your communities were offered meat rejected by southern meatpackers at ten times the price. We recognize the destructive hypocrisy of denying harvesters within the Park their modest and consistent request of one bison per family – a request the Dominion government agreed to when they imposed the first ban on wood bison hunting in 1896 – while carrying out export-driven mass slaughter. Particularly, as revenue from the sales was used to bolster the Park administration and not reinvested in the communities within it, “where they could have created circular reciprocity with the Land.”

12. Our pools of knowledge are shallow, and our spatial and temporal scales are different than yours. We try and develop models to predict, plan, and control the infinitely complex relationships of the Land with the least

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73 I have found numerous references to sending bison meat to a residential school or schools. It is often referred to as relief. Survivors have told Chloe and Robert that they were not given meat at school, so we assume this food that would have connected the children to their home and traditional diet was kept from them. We have concluded that administrators must have served the bison meat sent to residential schools to the staff only. This conjecture is supported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report findings, which found that students at residential schools were rarely given meat, while “the staff used to eat like kings, kings and queens” (89). I am currently waiting on documents from Libraries and Archives Canada that will shed light on the use of bison meat from Parks Canada in residential schools. Making this narrative clear to the public is integral to the truth that must come before reconciliation.

74 (McCormack 371)

75 (Sandlos 102)

76 (Dragon Smith and Grandjambe)
investment of time and money. We set policies from a distance when they need to be local, and the tenure of our initiatives match the cycles of elections, not the generational commitment the Land requires.

Your pools of knowledge are deep and dependent on a connection to place and language.

We tried to sever those ties; for that, we will work for generations to demonstrate our regret and commitment.

13. We have come to embrace the term “two-eyed seeing,” as envisaged by Mi’kmaw Elder Dr. Albert Marshall. It is a concept of “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing, and to use both these eyes together for the benefit of all.” But we cannot let our newfound plurality obscure the fact that the Canadian government stripped Indigenous peoples of their treaty rights and cultural identities for most of its existence if they sought a university education. From 1876 to 1961, we tried to outlaw “two-eyed seeing.”

14. We are taught that borders on maps are natural. Yet, we have seen that the Park’s borders are a conceptual construct with dire consequences when imposed on the Land. Not only because we have created a swath of Land where vital relationships between humans and the more-than-human have been severed, but because imagined borders gave us the convenient cover to not fight against the forces that flow into the Park; Dams, pulp mills, oil extraction, climate change.

Our attachment to conceptual borders extends to policing the boundaries between Wood Bison and Plains Bison, between pure and hybrid, between contaminated and uncontaminated. We have been steeped in the logic of white supremacy so long that we did not see how these logics of purity are weaponized against both bison and your people. The borders imagined by white supremacy place bison and Indigenous peoples outside the protective bounds of white and human. We believed our science was objective and ignored its eugenicist overtones. We were blind to how these discourses traumatized and retraumatized your people over decades.

15. When convenient, we butchered thousands of bison we knew to have Bovine Tuberculosis for human consumption. However, when TB was

77 (Elder Dr. Albert Marshall qtd Reid 243)
eliminated from Canadian cattle in the 1990s, we allowed Agriculture Canada to push through plans to eradicate all bison in Wood Buffalo National Park—and replace them with pure and uncontaminated wood bison from Elk Island National Park and the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary.

16. Instead of consulting with First Nations and Metis communities within WBNP about the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis afflicting the bison, the Environmental Assessment Review Panel determined that complete extermination was the only way forward. Only then did we want to hear from your communities. Not as peoples whose Land claims, treaties, and cultures give them an authoritative and valued voice, but lumped into general public comment. Again, we chose to ignore your unique connection to the bison and distinct rights under Treaty 8. On your own time and at your own expense, you came and battled state bureaucracy and lobbyists. Your elders made it clear that this was not simply a debate about diseases and genetic purity but the role of Indigenous harvesters in managing the Land upon which they depend. The testimony of members of your communities demonstrated the limitations of our knowledge and values. Chief Johnson Seewepagaham of Little Red River Cree Nation told the panel, “all of these animals are related in terms of dependence and inter-dependence with each other and how they function within.... the bush. Every animal has a role in the whole development of the bush. The wolf has a reason for being there, the wood buffalo has a reason for being there, the moose has a reason for being there.” The extermination campaign would have been disastrous because it followed the same logic as Buffalo National Park before it; it imagined the bison were an insular manageable commodity and ignored that they are an integral strand in a complex web of obligate relations. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the managers believed they could wipe the slate clean and start over, undoing the mistakes they made when they brought the plains bison from Buffalo National Park. They chose to believe that pulling the strand of bison from this web wouldn’t cause it to unravel. You forced them to face the truth.

17. We are ashamed that we fought for nearly a century to avoid fulfilling our Treaty 8 commitments to your Nations. We apologize to you, the Mikisew Cree First Nation. Even after the 1986 land entitlement agreement returned nearly nine thousand square kilometers of traditional territory to your nation, we failed in our obligation to consult with you and later fought your nation in court over the disruptive building of a winter road. This pattern has continued up until this day.

78 (Qt Ferguson and Burke 200)
Instead, what could have been the beginning of a new relationship proved to be just a continuation of adversarial acts, and we take responsibility for those hostilities. It is shameful that Smith's Landing First Nation and the Salt River First Nation had to wait until 2000 and 2001 to have their claims to reserve lands within Wood Buffalo National Park (established under Treaty 8) met. We acknowledge that Parks Canada was not the only barrier to establishing your reserve lands but as an arm of colonial authority we apologize for the actions of the governmental body.

We recognize that decolonization isn’t a metaphor. We, Parks Canada, have committed $59.9 million to revitalize Wood Buffalo National Park. We now recognize that the best way to protect Wood Buffalo National Park is to return it to its original stewards and to support the transition of Wood Buffalo National Park into an interconnected web of IPCAs. We are not abdicating responsibility for the mess we have made; we will be here to provide knowledge and assistance, but in the end, it will be your governance systems and laws that guide us. This process will not be swift or straightforward, but we hope you will hear the sincerity of our apologies and believe that we remain committed to the processes we have proposed here.
Conclusion

Aural modes of knowledge sharing have been privileged throughout this dissertation. So, it is fitting that I conclude by reflecting on an idea I heard on the ReSeed Podcast from poet and biologist J. Drew Lanham. He told host Alice Irene Whittaker that "instead of giving our hearts a soft landing on hope, we need to let them go ahead and break on despair." I think settlers force the stories we hear in conservation spaces into nice, hopeful, and inevitable ones, obscuring so much past and ongoing harm. In needing to be comforted, we obfuscate and never confront the worldviews that perpetuate these harms; this is the danger of confusing niceness and kindness.

The research I have undertaken over the past six years has made clear that the white supremacist and anthropocentric ways of knowing that I have inherited limit my understanding of bison to their taxonomy. A bison is a bison. This ontological perspective is strategic in an extractionist society – because beings without individuality, agency or relationships can be understood from afar, controlled through management plans and exploited as resources. Through the work I have presented in this dissertation, I have attempted to convey the ways bison and all our more-than-human relations resist this flattening and instrumentalizing of their being.

This dissertation conveys my journey to unlearn these ways of knowing, guided by Indigenous ways of relating to human and more-than-human kin. But these ways of knowing are limited to what Indigenous knowledge keepers can share with a white academy that has misused and abused their knowledge for centuries. Throughout the text, I am actively working to understand worldviews that I was not born into while also acknowledging that my access is and must remain limited; Indigenous ontologies, in all their evolving complexity, are foreclosed to those not born to specific cultural and spiritual heritages. This journey is ongoing and imperfect, but I continue to do my utmost to engage in anti-colonial scholarship, always conscious of the extractionist relationship to Indigenous knowledge that has defined Western research.

My work attempts to open up our empathetic imaginations through care and re-storying. Feeling the ongoing cost of our ways of knowing, letting our hearts break upon despair as mine did so many times in making this work, may be the shock we need, to learn that we humans aren't masters of the world but rather fragile beings in a web of reciprocal relationships. I encourage
readers to acknowledge and *feel* the weight of an interconnected genocide against Indigenous peoples and their bison kin, to face the truth that must come before any thought of reconciliation. Confronting how things were is the first step toward imagining how things might have been and can be different.
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Introduction

This section provides an expanded overview of the exhibition Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison at the McIntosh Gallery (2021) and my contributions to the GardenShip and State exhibition at Museum London (2021-2022). These inter-media artworks respond to three periods in settlers' relations with bison. The first is at the nadir of the bison population collapse in the 1880s. The second is their current state-controlled conservation. The third is a speculative decolonized future where Indigenous peoples and settler accomplices reestablish reciprocal relationships between bison and their kin. I developed works in Remnants, Outlaws and Wallows and GardenShip and State in response to each of these periods. bone rick emerges from the first. Wallow bridges the first and second periods. Romeo and Julian and Bison Movements: 7/25/2016 – 8/7/2016 are born of the second, current period. Speculative Bison Futures is another bridging piece, connecting the present moment to the third period. Finally, reclaim, Restore, and Honouring orient themselves toward the third period, while Forced Migration unites all three periods in a single work.
Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison Statement

The following artist’s statement, transcribed in chlorophyll ink, greeted visitors when they entered the exhibition and foreground its political context:

Bison were never meant to survive colonial expansion. In the United States, there was an unwritten yet well-known military campaign to eradicate the bison, the life source of many Indigenous nations resisting governmental subjugation. In Canada, their depletion was insidious because the Government planned their obsolescence. Canada's politicians may have conceded that they could save some bison as living specimens of a lost species, but the rest would fall before the advancing tide of white settlement. With them would go the multiple First Nations living in concert with them. The bison's near-extinction was a tool of assimilation; the famine that resulted from their loss drove many to sign treaties and accept reserves. The attempted erasure of bison and Indigenous peoples resonate with one another because, as theorist Aph Ko points out, the logic and systems of white supremacy have labelled both as animal in relation to the white human. And so, both have been treated as a wild other to be conquered and brought into proper relation to white human society. It was at the tipping point of bison extinction that the Canadian Government swooped in to save them. Settlers have been in the business of corralling, culling, and mythologizing the bison ever since.

This relationship with bison, established by settlers, has been inherited by today's generation. There are ways of knowing bison that we have inherited as well. These ways position them as artifacts, as population numbers and data.

The works in this exhibition reflect Wilson’s process of confronting and attempting to unlearn reductive and isolating taxonomical perspectives that arise from colonialism’s continuing legacy. They suggest ways of knowing through relationships and manifest what happens when we critically reconsider received facts with care, attention, and time. While bison are the centre of this exhibition, the inter-media and interdisciplinary works within it enact an enmeshed way of knowing the world; through the human and more-than-human beings that form it and are formed by it. Here, looping tendrils criss-cross and lead us toward understanding.
Exhibition Walk Through

In August 2021, after a yearlong delay, my thesis exhibition Remnants, Outlaws and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison opened at the McIntosh Gallery. This period, from August until September, was a sweet spot between the third and fourth wave of the pandemic. While the gallery was open to visitors, hours were limited, and many community members did not feel comfortable going into public settings. Added to these hurdles was the ongoing issue of the McIntosh Gallery itself, a space which presents multiple accessibility barriers. Fortunately, I was able to work with the gallery’s communication coordinator Abby Vincent to produce this virtual walkthrough. The video’s audio weaves together the exhibition text and audio excerpts. Please click on the still below, it will open the video on your web browser.

Figure 15 Remnants, Outlaws, Wallows Virtual Walkthrough (Still hyperlinked to video)
Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison
Exhibition Portfolio

*bone rick*, an experimental printmaking work I created with a 'bone-white' ink, represents the moment after near extirpation. Paired with the audio piece *bone rick: An Epitaph*, this work is an affective monument to the bones and bodies that nourished a significant portion of Turtle Island since time immemorial. The piece, however, does not remain sited in the past. The closing lines of *bone rick: An Epitaph* return the viewer to our current moment of ecological crisis by paraphrasing climate activist Greta Thunberg’s plea to abandon “colonial fairy tales of eternal physical and monetary expansion.” These words tie the precarity of both tipping points to the hegemonic ontology that positions individuals, human and more-than-human, as a resource to dominate and extract.

*bone rick*, 2019
101 bison-bone ink silkscreen prints, variable size
Contributor: bison from Blanbrook Bison Farm, Andrew Silk, and Jessica Woodward
*bone rick: An Epitaph, 2019,*  
Oral storytelling, audio recording, transcription, 14min

*bone rick: An Epitaph* is an audio work that accompanies the 101 bison-bone prints. When installed, it is available to viewers on a media player or via QR code.

I am looking at a photo, sepia toned with age. You’ve seen it. A man stands in front of a sheer wall of skulls and horns. He adopts the pose of a man in front of a grandiose fireplace: one hand on the mantel, the other on his raised knee, his foot resting on a hearth. Except there is no fireplace, just skulls. It’s a posture of absolute mastery and dominance. The pile rises behind him, nearly five times his size. Atop it stands another man, indistinct at this distance, but echoing his partner’s pose and bowler hat. This image from the Detroit Public Archive is often reproduced to illustrate the scale of the bison’s near extermination. But, if a picture is worth a thousand words, then we would need many, many more to understand the confluence of losses these piles of bones represent.

These bones made a final mass migration in tens of thousands of boxcars, following the route their hides had traveled in the decades before.

These skeletons became fertilizer, buttons, and china. They were used to filter yet another devastating colonial product: sugar.

These remnants live on in paintings and print matter, having been charred in a kiln, then ground and mixed with oil to make bone-black pigment.

They aren’t the only animals whose bodies were used to record their own annihilation, but my mind reels at the scale of it.

______________________

79 [Dana Claxton’s work Buffalo Bone China](#)
In 1873, before the mass arrival of homesteaders to the plains, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, the namesake of Dodge City, wrote “where there were once myriads of buffalo there are now myriads of carcasses. The air is foul with a sickening stench, and the plain, which only a short twelve months before teemed with animal life, is a dead, solitary, putrid desert.”

When homesteaders arrived in Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa, Montana, and the Dakotas in the 1880s, with their mule and ox carts, they were told to, quote unquote, improve the land. Land that bison and the multitudes of first nations people depended on and had just been eradicated from.

While the Sioux, Cree, Crows, Blackfeet, Kaws, Pawnees, Poncas, and Otoe-Missouria were obscured from the settler’s view, having been forced onto reserves and reservations by the late 1880s, the bones of the bison littered the ground that the farmers needed to till.

The bones were a nuisance to the homesteaders until the droughts came.\(^{80}\) Then they became a lifeline. In America, buffalo bones could be sold for $20 a ton at the industry’s peak. That would be about $560 today. It’s hard to imagine what 560 dollars would mean to a family whose crops, their only food, their only currency, had withered and died. I doubt that, after weeks of scavenging bones in the punishing sun, it felt much like winning the lottery. It probably just meant they could survive one more winter on their land, knowing they had to make it through five years for the government to say they owned it outright.

In Canada, the marginalized Metis that survived for a while off bone-picking, trading their cartloads for less than market value in store credit.\(^{81}\)

The land between the Qu’appelle valley and the Saskatchewan River was described as being “literally white with bison bones” (Barnett 21). I’ve seen a contrasty, impressionistic photograph of one of these killing fields. A sea of

\(^{80}\) Farming, especially in the 1800s, required an attention to short-term cycles. Plow the soil, cultivate a crop, reap enough of a return to survive the winter and make it to the next planting season. The value of bison bones was long-term, left on the ground they provide a rich and long-lasting reserve of calcium and mineral for rodents and the rest of the ecological community (Olson 80).

\(^{81}\) The Metis were not the only group to survive off the short-lived bone boom. In an 1892 travelogue, writer Hamlin Russel asks an unnamed Mountie, if the Northern Cree “make a living gathering these bones?” The Mountie replied, “Yes in a way... but it is a mercy that they can’t eat bones we were never able to control the savages until their meat supply was cut off. We have had no trouble worth speaking of since 1883, however.” The last known wild plains bison were seen in Canada in 1881.
bleached carnage outside Lloydminster, Saskatchewan. The description is not hyperbole.

Here in Canada, the bison-bone boom lasted three short years, starting in 1890. News of the burgeoning market preceded the advancing railroad. Piles of bones dotted the ribbon of land allotted for the promised trains.

Saskatoon became the collection point for the Metis bone-pickers. There, bone trading middlemen cooked their books to hide the wealth they were accumulating. They often received double what they paid the Metis for the bones. And understand when I say pay, I don’t mean cash. Few settlers would give the Metis anything more than store credit.

The accumulation of skeletons in Saskatoon soon outstripped the railroad’s ability to cart them away. The skulls were stacked with their horns interlocked, creating a corral to contain the sea of loose bones packed within. These bone-ricks mimicked the dimensions of a boxcar – eight feet wide, eight feet tall and 33 feet long.

At the outset of the second bone-picking season in 1891, the Metis set fire to the tall grasses west of the South Saskatchewan River. A technique once used to control the movement of bison herds was now used to reveal all that remained of them.

That summer the Metis from Fish Creek and Batoche were able to bring in over 200,000 sun-bleached skeletons from the blackened plain. As the search drew them in a further orbit from Saskatoon: 24km in 1890 to 80km in 1893, so grew the convoys of families in their screeching red river carts. Sixty or more might have pulled into the city at once. Oxen or horses straining under the burden of 1,200 pounds of bones, always accompanied by the sound of "a thousand fingernails dragged across a thousand windowpanes" as the ungreased cartwheels rubbed against dry axles.

By the end of 1891, the bone-ricks stretched for 800 feet next to the railroad tracks that ran through Saskatoon. There they stayed when the prairie winter froze them all in place. Similar accumulations could be seen at every railroad siding from Duck Lake in the north to Regina in the south.

By the time an economic depression knocked out the US markets in 1893, the grassland around Saskatoon had been all but picked clean. In the three years of the Canadian bone boom, 1,500,000 bison bodies had been extracted from the ecosystem.

The land, which had supported millions of bison, particularly in the vast austerity of the Southern Plains, was not suited to the burden of modern intensive farming.
The bones of the bison were sold to the east where they were processed for phosphorous and then sold back to homesteaders to fertilize their soil and to make it, “productive.”

But the parched ground that had been held in place by bluegrass and buffalo grass was quickly exhausted and blew away during immense dust storms that choked and starved the homesteaders’ descendants. The once fertile dirt blew all the way to the east coast, just as the continent was gripped by the great depression. Complete economic and ecological collapse were partnered specters exposing the colonial fairy tales of eternal physical and monetary expansion.82

It’s hard to blame those first settlers hunkered down in their dugout and sod homes, just trying to survive, trying to keep their babies alive.

They had been told the Earth was theirs to tame and to dominate, to extract all they could, that God’s bounty could never be exhausted. They were desperately treading water, adrift in a sea so expansive, so enveloping, that it couldn’t be perceived. They brought it with them to the prairie; “a social system, a set of values, an economic order” in which every dollar must be extracted from every inch of soil, every ounce of bison matter, every breath of human life (Worster). Maybe when the seas rise up, they will finally drown the fairy tale, but the fairy tale survived the dust clouds and the walls of bison bones, got stronger even, in the wake of these disasters. Maybe the fairy tale will be our epitaph.

82 “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” (Transcript: Greta Thunberg)
**Wallow**, a ceramic sculptural installation of two bison busts, is a bridge between the moment of extermination and conservation. The pose of these cow and calf figures, based on commercial taxidermy forms, is plaintive and arresting; the two bison rest on their backs, supported by low wooden platforms. When triggered by sensors painted on the floor, speakers embedded in the sculptures’ bases play field recordings of cows and calves communicating at Riding Mountain National Park’s display enclosure. This work mimics the impulse to transform beings with infinitely complex interrelations into decontextualized specimens. After colonial governments neutralized the bison as a threat to settler colonialism’s westward expansion, the state preserved them as what Pauline Wakeham expansively defines as *taxidermic signs*. Whether in a paddock or a natural history museum, settler-colonialism encodes the bison figure as a symbol of an extinct past replaced by a colonial present of mastery and order. Yet, bison resist this encoding by maintaining their lifeways and relations. In *Wallow*, I am grappling with this inheritance of ecological colonialism and the bison’s defiance of it.

*Wallow*, 2016-2017
Ceramic, epoxy, acrylic paint, wood, speakers, microprocessor, wires, conductive paint, field recordings of bison, variable size
Contributors: bison from Riding Mountain National Park, Matt Truman, Angus Cruikshank, Andrew Silk, Celes Davar, Ken Kingdom, and Marjorie Huculak

*Figure 16 Wallow, 2016-2017*
Wallow, 2016-2017 (detail)

Figure 17 Wallow, detail

Wallow, 2016-2017 (listening to calls)

Figure 18 Wallow, detail
The textile mapping works *Romeo and Julian* and *Bison Movements: 7/25/2016 – 8/7/2016* emerge from the current use of electronic tracking, mapping, and models in Western ecological knowledge production. In this work, I honour the knowledge shared with me by conservation biologists and the care and attachment they have towards their 'subjects.' These relations of care are rarely, if ever, explored or valued in their scholarly work. By tracing in thread the myriad of relationships hidden in the data, my hand exposes the subjective in the ostensibly objective. Recognizing embroidery's association with domestic economies of care reveals the embodied and affective relations explicit in the work’s meaning and materiality. The embroidered maps become aesthetic sites of interrelational density, where relationships and signifiers are quilted together to form meaning. They gesture toward the possibilities of what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls braiding ways of knowing (Kimmerer 2020).

*Romeo and Julian*, 2016-2021
GPS tracking data, wolf collars, wolf bodies, cotton thread, canvas, polyester Chiffon, glass beads, acrylic paint, 65 x 52 inches
Contributors: W09 (aka Romeo), W11 (aka Julian), Christina Prokopenko, and Debbie Mastin

*Figure 19 Romeo and Julian*
I was introduced to Christina Prokopenko by Riding Mountain National Park’s bison warden in 2017. I immediately discovered that though we had chosen different avenues of study (she was doing field research for a Ph.D. in biology), we both came to our work with genuine care and curiosity. Christina poetically described the beauty she saw in her data visualization, a constellation of nodes that connected her to embodied relationships to beings and places. The afternoon I spent with Christina inspired me to create the embroidered map *Romeo and Julian* based on her tracking data from two wolves she had been following. I spent nearly a year stitching this heavily encoded map, but when I had finished, it lacked the context and care that moved me when I listened to Christina describe her life with these two wolves. So, I contacted Christina, who had returned to St John’s to complete her dissertation at Memorial University. After a lengthy discussion about what the work was missing, we decided she would record herself narrating the lives and deaths of Romeo and Julian from her memory. She sent me an audio file that was over an hour long. I listened to the file many times and distilled the essential
narrative and ideas. It took me a few weeks to edit that file into the 14-minute audio work I made available with the embroidered piece in the exhibition (via QR code). Exhibited together, the visual and audio work communicates the layered, affective, and embodied ways of knowing that are foundational to my dissertation. Please click on the image of Julian and his pup’s remains, it will open the audio on your web browser.
Canvas, embroidery thread, imitation sinew, nails, bison, GPS coordinates, 50”x 64”
I explore a bridging moment between current and future paradigms in another textile mapping work, *Speculative Bison Futures*. In this piece, beads in circular clusters stand in for bison bodies as they exist now, controlled, and corralled through ranching and conservation efforts. In contrast, needle felted wool represents potential bison bodies reintroduced by Indigenous signatories to the Bison Treaty, which envisions free-ranging bison rematriated to their ancestral territories. The temporality embodied in *Speculative Bison Futures* straddles the current moment and a potential future that is both promising and terrifying. I have intentionally colonized this piece made primarily with wool, by introducing clothing moths, representing climate change's disruptive and destructive agency in all possible futures.

*Speculative Bison Futures*, 2019 - ongoing
Wool felt (organic unprocessed and recycled), raw wool, dyed merino wool roving, beads, embroidery thread, wood, screws, plexiglass, plastic sheets, tape, yeast dissolved in water, time, 78x60 inches
Contributors: Moths & moth larvae, Matt Truman, and Kate Carder
4. *Speculative Bison Futures, 2019 - ongoing*
Speculative Bison Futures, 2019 – ongoing (detail)

Figure 23 Speculative Bison Futures, 2019 – ongoing (detail)
Tineola bisselliella (clothing moth) – documentation of life processes from Speculative Bison Futures, 2021
Deceased moth, scanner, ink-jet print, 16 x 20 inches

Figure 24 Tineola bisselliella (clothing moth)
Human and more-than-human collaboration guides my vision of just relations in a suite of works titled *Reclaim, Restore, and Honouring*. This body of work includes video documentation of performances projected in a dark room with the deconstructed remains of a taxidermy mount. Together the installation enacts the ‘learning-with’ necessary for a future in which bison, sovereign Indigenous nations, and settler accomplices abide together. *Honouring*, a performance by KC Adams and myself, is an attempt to recall a bison robe from a static and objectified state. After removing the taxidermized hide during a durational performance at the Museum of Ontario Archaeology and restoring it in my home (documented in *Reclaim* and *Restore*), KC and I honoured the young bull's remains by transferring their stewardship, enabling KC to return the hide to an active existence through her cultural and Land-based teachings. *Honouring* presents a call and response on distant lands. In this two-channel video, KC receives the hide, singing a song to honour its gift and using it as a catalyst to teach her mother, Judy and son Mac about reciprocal relations with water and land through clay. I then shared these teachings with my daughter, Asa. This work is meant to model mutuality among all relations and a vision for a new way forward anchored in inherited, land-based traditions.
Reclaim and Restore, 2019-2020 (Installation view)
Two-channel video documentation of a durational performance, (21:16)
Contributors: Unnamed young bison bull, Matt Dupont, Debbie and Don Mastin, David Branch, Elaine Wilson

And

KC Adams and Michelle Wilson, Honouring, 2021 (Installation view)
Two-channel video documentation of performance, (14:09)
Contributors: Unnamed young bison bull, Judith Adams, Mac Gray Adams, Josh Gray, Casey Koyczan, Asa Cruikshank, Matt Dupont, Angus Cruikshank, Matt Truman

Figure 25 Reclaim and Restore & Honouring (Installation view)
Figure 26 Honouring (Installation View)
Additional Works:

*When they were gone*, 2021 (image hyperlinked to video)
Charred bison bone, wood, motor, LEDs, plexiglass, wires, electricity (nuclear, hydroelectric, coal, natural gas and wind)
Contributors: bison from Blanbrook Bison Farm, Brian Lambert, Andrew Silk

![Image of the artwork *When they were gone*]

Figure 27 *When they were gone, 2021*

*A quote from Temple*, 2021
Text from Michael Christie’s Greenwood, chlorophyll ink, paper 40 x 26 inches

![Image of the handwritten text]

Figure 28 *A quote from Temple, 2021*
Charred bison bone, 2021
Charred bison bone, scanner, scanner, ink-jet print, 16 x 16 inches

Figure 29 Charred bison bone 2021
Forced Migration, my contribution to the group exhibition GardenShip and State, is a bridge between the past, present, and future with bison. Visually, Forced Migration represents the movement of five bison calves taken into captivity in the 1870s and then the transfer of their descendants and kin from owner to owner over the following century. However, it is also a repository for audio stories that play when viewers touch the map. These stories take as their focal point the men who tried to control the bison and establish themselves as 'saviours' ("Alloway," "Bedson," "Buffalo Jones," "Search for Facts"), the bison who lived in reciprocity with one another and the Land ("Fight or Flight," "Blood Memory") and the colonial system of conservation itself ("Numbers," "Apology"). As the narrator, I periodically employ quotes from the archive to situate these stories in the past. In other parts, I share my own embodied subjective experience. In the final piece, "Apology," I respond to and consult with educators and activists Chloe Dragon-Smith and Robert Grandjambe to craft an actionable apology that accounts for the past while proposing a decolonized future in Wood Buffalo National Park. These audio essays reveal how ideologies around capitalism, human exceptionalism, and white supremacy have influenced settler relations to the more-than-human world. In creating these affective, sound-designed audio works, I have intentionally extracted archival-research based narratives from a white supremacist, patriarchal written tradition for critical purposes.
Forced Migration, 2020-2021
Wool (felted and roving), embroidery thread, conductive thread, glass beads, copper tape, wood, imitation sinew, microprocessor, speakers, wire cable, rocks

Figure 30 Forced Migration, 2020-2021
Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows: A Virtual Symposium

This symposium was initially envisioned as an in-person gathering, celebrating community and dialogue. Early in 2019, I negotiated with the director of McIntosh Gallery, James Patten, to bring Wes Olson, Les Campbell and KC Adams to London to discuss the cultural and ecological importance of bison in the context of the exhibition. I asked Dan and Mary Lou Smoke to begin the event in a good way with a teaching, blessing, and song. However, after the year of delays previously mentioned, I gave up on the idea that we could physically come together and was very grateful that all the contributors were willing to adapt their presentations to an online format. The video walkthrough allowed me to share the exhibition with elders Dan and Mary Lou Smoke, who could not visit the gallery due to its lack of accessibility. However, there are some things that we cannot adapt to a digital platform. Thus, I was honoured to host Dan and Mary Lou in my backyard before the symposium. There, I followed traditional protocol by offering Dan and Mary Lou tobacco in exchange for their blessing and knowledge at the outset of the symposium. Mary Lou offered to perform the Buffy Sainte-Marie song "Now that the Buffalo's Gone," so we recorded her performance on my small patio. I will never forget my neighbours' faces appearing at their windows as Mary Lou sang this poignant song into the night.

At the symposium, Les and Wes shared insight on the critical ecological and cultural work we can achieve through Indigenous-led conservation work. KC presented her Land-based art practice and its essential connection to Cree and Anishinaabe culture and our more-than-human relations. This cathartic event closed with a prayer from Dan and Mary Lou, reminding us of the humility needed to live in true reciprocity with the world. Please click on the still below, it will open the video on your web browser.

![Figure 31 Remnants, Outlaws, and Wallows Virtual Symposium (Still hyperlinked to video)](image-url)
CBC Interview: The Complicated History of North American Bison

In connection with the exhibition and symposium at the McIntosh Gallery, I spoke with local radio host Chris Dela Torre in September 2021. I pushed for this opportunity to speak on the CBC because it challenged me to communicate to a broad audience the importance of re-storying our relationships as settlers to bison. I passionately believe that reorienting ourselves to the more-than-human world and one another is vital in this moment of social and environmental precarity. However, we cannot achieve this reorienting if we remain siloed in institutions. So, I am continually searching for creative ways to engage the empathetic imaginations in the communities I walk in. Please click on the image below, it will open the audio on your web browser.
Outlaw #5, 2021
taxidermy bison shoulder mount, wooden platform, audio recording, Museum London

As my audio essay for this piece states, “I went to the Manitoba Museum in 2017 to see Outlaw #5. He was on display as part of the Legacies of Confederation exhibit, and I was eager to see this bison bull who had haunted several Winnipeg institutions since 1912.” In the years that followed this first visit with Outlaw #5, I had two opportunities to share his story. First, Shawna Dempsey, the Co-Executive Director of MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art), invited me to contribute a critical theory essay for their quarterly newsletter (see Part 4). I was honoured to share my discursive work with this innovative and supportive Winnipeg-based artist-run organization. After some discussion with Shawna, I submitted the essay “Outlaw #5.” I could not have written it without the work of the Manitoba Museum’s head of Zoology Randy Mooi. Randy and I began corresponding over his archival research into Outlaw #5’s identity. Our working relationship led to my second and more incredible opportunity to work with this singular bison.
Jeff Thomas and Patrick Mahon invited me to contribute to the Museum London exhibition *GardenShip and State*. I asked the curators if it would be possible to bring in Outlaw #5. I proposed repositioning him on his back and placing him in relation to my piece *Forced Migration* which conveys the story of his kin. With the help of Randy and fellow *GardenShip* contributor and curator of the HBC museum collection Amelia Faye I realized my vision. It was an unexpectedly emotional moment when preparators removed him from a giant crate in the exhibition space. Interdisciplinary artist and contributor to *GardenShip and State*, Adrian Stimson, honoured Outlaw #5 and welcomed him to the space by leading a prayer and smudge with braided sweetgrass from his Siksika Nation home. Adrian shared his experiences with this bison’s descendants at Wanuskewin and the renewal they represent. In the coming months, I hope to record a conversation with Adrian, connecting the past and the future through the Outlaw’s remains.

*Figure 34 Sweetgrass and plaque for Outlaw #5 – documentation of Welcoming Ceremony*
Forced Migration Poster Collaboration

In conjunction with the *GardenShip and State* exhibition at Museum London I coordinated a collaboration with Rezonance Printing to create a limited run, silkscreen version of *Forced Migration*. The front of the poster featured a three-colour print of the textile map, while the reverse carried the full transcript of the audio essays.

This collaboration was a way to support Rezonance Printing, a local Indigenous-run business that operates a paid internship program that bridges the gap between culture, art, and entrepreneurial skills through the medium of screen-printing. They support Indigenous artists and youth in pursuing economic sovereignty, wealth generation and social enterprise via paid apprenticeship programs, community workshops and collaborative arts projects.

The posters were sold to raise funds for the building of a traditional Anishinaabe Round House on Chippewa of the Thames First Nation. When completed it will be a space of learning, community, healing, and growth where the community may gather, celebrate, socialize, feel connected to the land, traditional ceremonies, and one another.

The organizers of the fundraising efforts state, “for those serious about Reconciliation, the creation of this space would be a massive step forward for the Anishinaabe peoples of Southwestern Ontario and beyond. A leap forward in the restoration of community, cultural teachings, and language revitalization” (*Creation of an Anishinaabe Round House*). Print sales raised $835 for the project.

![Figure 35 Forced Migration Poster, Front and Back, 2021](image)
Part 4: An Appendix of Other Projects.

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Introduction

As a settler, I believe that feminist ethics of care and decolonial frameworks can provide pathways to recognizing our imbricated kinship with the more-than-human while also addressing our current moment of cultural and ecological peril. Part 4: An Appendix of Other Projects documents how I relationally developed and delivered this dissertation’s findings to communities beyond the academy.

This section catalogues these experiences chronologically, beginning with my artist's residencies at Riding Mountain National Park in 2016 and 2017. My field research from these trips is documented in two essays and a video, demonstrating the knowledge that one can develop relationally. Next, I briefly discuss ECOCREATIVITY, an art and science event organized by Christina Battle and me in 2017. My projects resume in 2019 with Reclamation, a multi-day performance and artist talk at the Museum of Ontario Archaeology. I present this project through in-process photographs and a text I wrote reflecting on the performance. The projects that follow primarily occur online due to the global pandemic. For example, the next section is an essay composed through my participation in two online creative writing workshops. Next, I have included a copy of my 2021 article for MAWA, titled “Outlaw #5.” Following this text is documentation of a podcast that emerged from my thesis research-creation called “Forced Migration: Bison Stories and What They Can Tell Settlers about a Past, Present, and Future on Stolen Land.” This episode, released by the academic literary Podcast SpokenWeb, was produced within a community of scholars from across Canada. Around the same time, poet Kevin Heslop interviewed me for T3mz review. Kevin published this wide-ranging discussion as a written transcript and a creative re-enactment by actors Kristin Bennett and Damon Muma. Next, Sowing Clay, a collaboration with Paul Chartrand, brought me back to in-person community-based work. We organized a series of workshops and talks to create a living memorial to murdered land and water defenders. Finally, I contributed to After Progress, a digital story-telling exhibition organized by Goldsmiths, University of London. The curators describe the online exhibition as “a living archive, a testimony of what happened and what can still happen in the interstices of such distances, when we insist in spite of all on thinking and being together (apart),” affectively describing my reorienting of community-based work in a global pandemic.
My praxis with bison began in 2016 when I had the privilege of being awarded an artist residency at Riding Mountain National Park by the Manitoba Arts Council. Every day for two weeks, I observed and captured audio recordings of the bison in the Lake Audy Plain enclosure. With the support of the Manitoba Arts Council, I returned in 2017 to continue my field research. During these two residencies, I gave several presentations, but mostly I did a lot of listening: to bison, biologists, interpreters, and community members. In listening to the stories of these bison, what was left unsaid became so present to me that I needed to know more. The more I became attuned to stories of bison conservation, the more they led me in multiple interconnected directions. Tracing these connections became the impetus for this dissertation and how I have presented it. Through my research, I learned of Riding Mountain National Park’s dark history. As the bison were being brought back to the park as a tourist attraction, park wardens forced members of the Keeseekoowenin First Nation from their homes, burning their houses in the middle of the night.

It is a sign of my privilege as a settler that I could go to places like Riding Mountain and hear conservation stories and remain unaware of the malevolence these narratives obscure. For some, National Parks continue to be sites of deep intergenerational trauma. We must appreciate
conservation’s intractable connection to white supremacy and colonization to understand bison. Parks Canada’s Mandate states that as a Canadian, I have inherited these lands for my “benefit” and “enjoyment,” but with that inheritance comes the responsibility to ask, for whose enjoyment? And at what cost?

The following are two vignettes I produced following my residencies; they document the relational research practice I developed on the ground with bison and their human kin. Additionally, they represent the starting point of the inquiries explored in this dissertation.

Fescue Prairie

The mid-summer hours before dusk were a riot of birdsong and insect trills and buzzes. The fescue prairie grasses, so rare in this anthropocentric world of land and resource exploitation, were beginning to dry and turn golden, preparing their seeds in response to hydrological triggers. Celes Davar was with me on that first day and guided my senses toward all this unfolding. Celes was a biologist who had once worked for Parks Canada and now provided eco-tours. I asked him to take me out to the bison enclosure and help me interpret what I was seeing and hearing. On one of our trips to the enclosure, Celes prepared a series of readings to perform for me in situ. One of these passages made an immediate and indelible impact. I made this video in response to Celes’ reading from *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* by Don Gayton.

![Figure 37 Still from Western Porcupine Grass](hyperlinked to video)
A few days after this encounter with Celes, I was trying to explain my new obsession with porcupine grass seeds to Peter Tarleton. Peter was the current bison warden at RMNP, but he was more interested in bison for how they maintain his real passion, prairie grasses. He listened to my rambling about the metaphorical strength of the funnelling awl of the seed - and then proceeded to inform me that not everyone thinks the grass is so great. A friend of his was walking through tall prairie grass with his dog in mid-summer when the seeds of the western porcupine grass began to disperse. First, one of the quills found its way into the dog’s coarse fur unobserved, then its coiling mechanism did its work, but this time drilling its way into flesh. Finally, part of the seed made its way to the dog’s heart and ended its life.

I tell you these stories to illustrate why I am drawn to the seed of porcupine grass: because it is an agental node in the material world, but also a helpful model for understanding, I can follow inward its spiralling shape to pinpoint focus and specificity, or I can trace my way outward and gain distance and context, and under the right conditions I can move down its needle-like shaft and pierce flesh to make felt our affective connections.

**Buffy’s Story**

I can picture that morning perfectly. Pat and I sat in the cab of his old pickup truck, the engine shut off, gripping our travel mugs of tepid coffee. Outside my window was a group of about a dozen bison, mostly cows and calves. Pat, now retired, had been the park’s bison warden for decades. He quietly interpreted the vocalizations, body language, and social dynamics we were seeing.

I was surprised when Pat hopped out of his truck to help me with my gear that morning. We had spoken on the phone the day before, planning the sunrise trip to the bison enclosure, and I had found Pat’s gruff and gravelly voice a little intimidating. I had prepared myself for a large, burly man, not this slight 60-year-old. His thick white mustache, however, perfectly fit the bill. He was the image of the aging cowboy—a Manitoba Sam Elliot.

Awkward pauses and silences punctuated the 40-minute drive to the bison, the kind that haunt first meetings between strangers. I strained to hear the rasp of his voice over the rattling of the
truck on the gravel road. But, as we sat in the warmth of the morning sun, grunts and bellows all around us, the conversation flowed freely. He told me of Buffy, the young heifer from Elk Island he brought over to diversify herd genetics, how she kicked the crap out of him when he tried to get her out of the trailer. His voice was joyful as he told me how she would come to him when he would call, rewarded with handfuls of hay. And how, because of her lowliness in the social order in those early years, it would draw the other cows to follow. After all, who did she think she was going first and making moves on her own? Even when she had become the herd matriarch, she would come when he called. He told me how, many years later, he lost Buffy to one of the many brutal winters. A false spring had come, and after a slight thaw and then a hard freeze, the herd was trapped, unable to break through the solidly frozen snow even with their weight and strength. Eventually, Pat went out to feed them, even though they would have just died in the ‘natural’ way of things. But it was too late for Buffy. This man, who had laughingly recounted close calls culling bulls, had a voice tinged with emotion when he spoke of Buffy’s passing.

Pat caught me off-guard, and again proved the bias of my expectations, when we discussed herd migration. He was telling me that the land we were on would have been traditionally wintering territory. In the summer, the original bison would have gone down the Minnedosa Valley into Saskatchewan and onto the Dakotas, then back up – all led by a lead cow. He then launched into a rant about the cultural coding of scientific observational knowledge. To this day, he said, this, the matriarchal nature of bison, is one of the hardest things to teach young men. Before I could ask why, he stated that this blindness is partly because of biology’s European heritage, which historically considered women chattel, not intelligent enough to lead anything, “Which was a pile of crap then and it is now.” He asserted emphatically that in bison, males do nothing; they don’t even protect the herd; they just breed. Pat said that resistance to this knowledge stems from cultural artifacts like paintings by Fredrick Remington. With its curved horns and luscious curly cape, the bull bison in these paintings leads his panicked cows, often pursued by emaciated yet determined Indigenous hunters. Pat noted that when Remington was producing his images of the buffalo hunt in the 1890s, the bison were already nearly gone.
ECOCREATIVITY: Bringing Art & Biology Together in Conversation

In the early years of my doctoral research, fellow Ph.D. candidate Christina Battle and I often discussed feeling cloistered in the visual arts department at Western. We longed for organic opportunities to make connections and collaborate with researchers in the sciences. Not finding such opportunities, even before the pandemic, we decided to make our own. We proposed an event in the Art Lab Gallery where biologists would present their research to visual arts students and faculty. Christina and I each invited a speaker we were interested in working with and organized a tour of the Biotron plant, a facility not ordinarily accessible to the arts community. I approached Dr. Sheila Macfie, whose research examines phytoremediation in response to heavy metal contamination. Dr. Macfie subsequently assisted me in testing blackberries from an abandoned “brown site” in the Coves Environmentally Significant Area. We found significant lead contamination, a disturbing fact that continues to fuel my art and activism on this site. This event represents the beginning of my organizing efforts around interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge mobilization.
Reclamation: A multi-day performance and artist talk

Reclamation, 2019,
performance, Museum of Ontario Archaeology, 21 hours

I wanted to locate my performance Reclamation within an institution where it could instigate meaningful conversations about systems of knowledge production and their deconstruction. So I approached the Museum of Ontario Archaeology in the fall of 2019 to propose a short residency where I could perform and film this work. I found the organization receptive to the idea and negotiated a semi-public three-day performance in their aptly named Collaboration Room. Over the three days, I removed the hide from a taxidermy shoulder mount I had found on Kijiji. I tried to find as much information as possible about this small bison, but mainly finding dead ends, I contacted my friend and former Riding Mountain bison warden, Pat Rousseau. He informed me that my bison was likely a young bull. I had the opportunity to speak to several groups and individuals. An artist’s talk followed this residency period in the museum’s theatre. Below is a prose poem I wrote in response to the performance. I performed a reading of it during the artist talk.
**Water Reanimated Flesh**

Before we started, I combed my fingers through his hair, fluffy in places and sleek in others. I joked to my videographer Matt that it was so strange seeing a bison so clean after being with living ones; you would never want to run your fingers through their coats (Rolling in dirt and piss is a favourite pastime). But once I started spraying the water, all the soil deep down in this young bull’s coat began to run and flow, dripping onto the crinkling tarp. The only other sound was my huffing and grunting.

As his coat dried a little, the soil wafted off in little poufs into my mouth and nose when I was in close, gripping his flesh and wrapping my arms around him.

The tanned underside of his hide became pliable again as I wet and worked it, at times making me feel like I was looking at something indecent, like a skin suit in a horror movie.

At times the pulling and tugging echoed the gestures of pulling a swimsuit off a small child; somehow, you just know how much force you can exert on a delicate body. At other times I was frustrated with myself, frustrated with the process I had committed myself to. I hadn’t expected the violence it required.

In the end the three days of down-to-the-bones exertion, worry, and anticipation reminded me of the three days of labour it took to bring my daughter into the world. It was long, exhausting, and painful with a slow creep of progress and then a quick rush of force and tearing, and it was done. I still can’t put words to the jumble of emotions that followed either process. In both cases, the days of labour were what I spent months preparing for and, in the end, were only the beginning.

I recently heard someone discussing thin places, where the barrier between the spirit world and physical world is tenuous and permeable, and it made me think of the bison I have known as thick spaces, places where I can feel so much of the past, present, and future. It’s like that old aphorism: ‘the past doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.’ So, I am trying to listen for those rhymes and arrange them into the call and response of a song.
RECLAMATION: AN ARTIST TALK

WITH MICHELLE WILSON
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE MUSEUM OF ONTARIO ARCHAEOLOGY

NOVEMBER 7th, 7PM
MUSEUM OF ONTARIO ARCHAEOLOGY
1600 ATTAWANDARON RD, LONDON, ON

Figure 41 Artist talk poster - in conjunction with Museum of Ontario Archaeology performance
Figure 42 In-progress documentation from Reclamation
What Makes a Bison

In March 2021 I was fortunate enough to participate in two writing workshops. The first was with Indigenous poet Tommy Pico and the second was with artist and writer Rachel Epp Buller. These two experiences allowed me to engage with other writers and to free myself from strict fidelity to historical facts. This letter emerged from these experiences. It is a fictocritical response to Carrie Tait’s 2020 article for the Globe and Mail titled, “Scientists and Indigenous leaders team up on project to revive purebred bison population.” It was produced by intuitively redacting the article and writing into the spaces that were left. I have used strikethrough on the redacted text, leaving it visible so you can read the original intent, my interventions look like this. The project was not meant to erase other’s voices but rather to creatively question what on its surface seems, like so many conservation acts, an initiative for the ‘greater good.’

Bison are not what you think they are.

They aren’t just walking bags of meat or blood. What they are isn’t simply held in their genetics.

The bison steaks at the swish restaurant downtown, bison burgers from A&W, bison briskets from the farmers market: Not bison. Bison are and have always been in a constant state of becoming with people, culture, land, seeds, water, countless grasses, shit, prairie dogs, cowbirds, wolves and later fences, cows, diseases, trains, guns, global hide, and meat markets, and on and on and on. Commercial bison – came out of this process. Ranchers selected bulls and made them available for breeding, simplifying a mutual selection process that used to happen during mass congregations on the open prairie. The rancher did not follow the rules of natural or sexual selection. They wanted docile animals with a lot of meat. Animals from which today’s bison products are made – But they also produced hybrid creatures: Often breeding a bison bull to a domestic cow. If she survived the first birth, she could often go on to deliver more hybrids, and despite what you may have heard in biology class, these two species could produce fertile offspring. Birth rates, however, were low, and these ‘cattalo’ experiments were abandoned early on. Hybrids were not always kept separate or destroyed, and so a half bison half cow, birthed a quarter cow mix, then an eighth, and so on and so on. Their bison genes are Now, most bison are considered polluted with cattle DNA. One drop is enough to be considered impure.

Purebred bison—direct descendants of the animals that blanketed North America before colonization — They are scant, protected and short on genetic diversity. Today, there are only about 1,500 purebred plains bison in Canada’s conservation herds, all These descendants of 50 that I have followed from their capture near Battleford, Saskatchewan, animals that managed to dodge hybridization in the early 1900s.
Now, scientists and Indigenous leaders in Western Canada are taking a crack at reviving the purebred bison population. It is I am tremendously nervous about a project grounded in science and blended uncritically with cultural significance. Researchers in Saskatchewan are building a genome biobank that would allow them to a site to store semen and embryos until they can be implanted in mothers, hybrid and pure. They believe they can dramatically The goal is to deepen the purebred gene pool while quickly expanding herds.

But why?

The scientists reckon purebreds could replace hybrids within 20 years. This The researchers and Indigenous stakeholders say there are benefits for would better animal health, it will improve the environment and pure bison will provide create new economic opportunities and ensure the animal many Indigenous peoples consider sacred thrives.

“The animal of our Blaine Favel, you want to get back to the animal of your ancestors – not some deformity that we. One that settlers created 100 years ago,” says Blaine Favel, a Cree man who has worked in politics, academics, business and Indigenous circles and who is involved with the project. “It’s our I want that too.

You want the land to be populated with your spiritual brother.”

Gregg Adams, an expert in reproductive biology, is leading the bison project at the University of Saskatchewan’s Western College of Veterinary Medicine. The scientists, after a decade of failure, have figured out a key step: how And so, humans have developed a way to collect semen and embryos from bison and freeze this genetic material without killing it. these seeds of new life, they The team has also proved it can artificially inseminate bison by appointment—ensuring

The ability to transport and preserve genetic material is key because it solves two crucial problems: biodiversity and biosecurity. Experts believe the 4,500 bison in Yellowstone National Park are purebred; they could give Canada’s isolated bison access to an untapped source of genes.

In some ways, I am so excited by this project because I believe that the lives of bison and their herd’s matter; they matter to them. Since bison can’t come together to breed in mass summer migrations on sun-scorched plains—because cities, highways and fences have taken their place—then I’m happy their sperm and embryos can make the migration for them, ferried in coolers across international borders. I’d rather than see bison bodies shuffled around like other species are, to preserve genetic integrity, never mind their bonds to one another or place. Ferrying embryos and semen It is a lot less brutal than the slaughter of mothers and forced adoption of the newly born; that’s how humans saved these purebreds back in the day. over the Canada-U.S. border is simpler than transporting live animals in terms of health and safety regulations. It is also much cheaper — and easier — than hauling bison bulls, which weigh roughly 900 kilograms, and bison cows, which clock in at about 500 kg, around the continent for breeding.
Dr. Adams says he believes the project could produce 300 purebred calves over five years. Add in another 15 years and Dr. Adams hopes there will be enough purebreds to cull hybrids out of existence and replace them with genetically pure bison. Some undo what settlers did about a century ago, crossbreeding bison with when they forced or simply allowed their cattle in hopes of making their cattle herds more resilient in the cold climate.

“It’s not like we’re turning back the clock thousands of years,” Dr. Adams says. “We have a chance to do this.”

His team has artificially inseminated roughly 100 bison cows, with a pregnancy rate of more than 40 percent, as it worked to prove the reproduction strategy is viable. I just get uncomfortable with the echoes. A hybrid mother bison cows will also contribute to the crossbreed population’s demise: A hybrid animal implanted with purebred embryos will produce a purebred calf, allowing scientists to her fecundity accelerates her own cull. the rate at which it can expand genetically-pure herds.

I worry that the focus on numbers and purity obscures relationships and how they will be nurtured and maintained, how will we make space and time for these connections to be mended. That’s what we need, isn’t it?

I worry about good intentions.

I hope that you and your colleagues will return bison to their traditional home.

Grasslands National Park, about 330 kilometres southwest of Regina hosts one of Canada’s few purebred bison herds. These plains bison stem from the herd in the Elk Island National Park east of Edmonton, but it is not their traditional home. Adriana Bacheschi, who oversees the park, says the plains bison in Grasslands are doing better than their counterparts in the more wooded Elk Island.

On their ancestral turf, they are healthier, fatter and their reproduction rates have gone up, Ms. Bacheschi says. The keystone species graze hard and their reintroduction has diversified the area’s plants. Animals on in the park are also returning to their old ways, with bison bunched together, some bulls wandering separately, and coyotes following at a distance.

“It just looks right,” she says. “There are a few of those little old patterns coming back.”

The herd grows by about 28 per cent a year, Ms. Bacheschi says, in part because it has no In time I hope natural predators, human and more-than-human, will learn to be with bison again and that these pure bison will be given enough time and space to re-establish rhythms with the land and its people, and in the park. Parks Canada will no longer need to intervene to gives away purebred animals to conservation groups and Indigenous peoples to keep the size of its own herds manageable. And that is where Mr. Favel, a former chancellor at the University of Saskatchewan, comes in. He won a bison lottery run by Parks Canada and was awarded 20 female animals. He learned about the university’s bison project and donated his animals to the
effort. The university now has 48 pure plains bison, which are officially called Bison bison bison.

The revitalization project, Mr. Favel says, could, at some point in the future, boost I don’t know if these efforts have brought spiritual and economic reconciliation—I don’t know if any of us can reconcile the loss of millions. But that’s just it—I don’t know. I’m not a biologist. I’m not Blackfoot or Anishinaabe or Nehiyaw. I’m just a settler artist with an obsession, but still, I feel called to ask, what makes a bison?

Bison are “the most important animal for Plains Indians that the creator gave us” and the biobank could ensure the animals are healthy and survive, he says.

Indigenous peoples would have access to authentic bison items such as hides, meat and skulls. They could make, wear and sell traditional bison goods such as moccasins, Mr. Favel says. Tourists, he reckons, will want to see authentic bison and purchase traditional items. Hybrid bison meat sells for a premium and pure bison could surpass that markup.

“Our time on this planet is fleeting,” Mr. Favel says. “If we can make it better than what we’re given, then that’s a really good accomplishment.”

Scientists do not have enough information to determine whether northern Alberta’s free-roaming wood bison—officially known as Bison bison athabascae—carry cattle genes. The wood bison that are known to be genetically pure all descend from 23 animals. Roughly 300 pure wood bison live in Elk Island, on the southern side of Highway 16, while roughly 400 purebred plains bison live on the northern side. The University of Saskatchewan has 38 purebred wood bison in its herd.

If the bison project is going to be a successful component of reconciliation, the strategy must combine traditional values with modern realities, says Leonard Bastien, a traditional knowledge-keeper in the Blackfoot Confederacy.

“There would have to be a business plan,” Mr. Bastien, who also goes by Leonard Weasel Traveller, which is the English translation of his traditional name. “It is about making money.”

At the same time, the bison—which he also refers to as buffalo—must end up in an area where they can sustain themselves.

“The lifeblood of my people is the buffalo,” he says.
MAWA Essay: Outlaw #5

Outlaw #5
BY MICHELLE WILSON

I went to the Manitoba Museum in 2017 to see “Outlaw #5.” He was on display as part of the Legacies of Confederation exhibit, and I was eager to see this bison bull who had haunted several Winnipeg institutions since 1912. The gallery where I found him was not large, and from the ceiling hung a surveyor’s chain, the metal bit-like links fencing in the forever arrested “Outlaw.”

Taxidermy is just the stretching of a thin layer of fur and flesh over an artful human-made form. Glass or resin eyes give the illusion of liveliness. It is seductive. There is a morbid pleasure in looking into those eyes, but eventually, you become aware that you are just seeing your reflection.

The inherited myth conveyed by the Legacies of Confederation exhibit was seductive as well. It is a myth that I, as a white settler, have inherited. This bison’s body, masculine and virile, was one of the last to resist Canada’s salvation. His kin were bought from Michel Pablo, an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and saved from destruction through Parks Canada’s protection.

The outlines of this story hold up if you stand very squarely in your settler identity — If you embrace Parks Canada, the protector of Canada’s natural and cultural heritage for your enjoyment, as your inheritance. But narrow your eyes and shift your perspective. You will see that this legacy myth is only a thin shroud over the complicated tangle of colonial realities that brought this bison here.

It was almost six years ago that I went to listen to the bison at Riding Mountain National Park. I realized that to begin to appreciate another being, you must know them in community with their imbricated kin because they are continually becoming in relationship with them. In the years that followed, I have come to know that those ties do not end in “nature.” There is no divide between human and environmental history, and so to know the bison I sat with on those scorching August afternoons, I would have to look hard at the fences that brought them to this fenced pasture. It is almost six years, and I am almost ready to tell that story, but it will not fit here.

continued next page...

Figure 43 MAWA newsletter article pg. 1
So let me focus on what this “fine specimen” can connect us to if we return him to his context. Tribal members had brought bison to the Flathead Reservation in an act of stewardship and conservation. These bison were allowed free range on pastureland that was held communally by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. There they thrived for decades, multiplying until over 700 of them grazed the valley south of Flathead Lake. The bounds of the reservation and the tribal authority protected several generations while the US military and hide-hunters eradicated the bison outside the reservation. The Salish model of care was working. The old bulls like Outlaw #5 would sometimes stray off the reservation, and Michel Pablo or his ranch hands would drive them back. Pablo wanted to avoid conflict with his white neighbours, and when Pablo could not keep a bull within the reservation, he had him shot. When the old creature was butchered and skinned, they often found that these neighbours had filled his tough, battered hide with all kinds of buckshot and .22 calibre bullets.

In 1904, after years of bitter protest by tribal leaders and in violation of the 1855 Hellgate Treaty, Theodore Roosevelt signed the Flathead Allotment Act into law. This law forced tribal members to take individual parcels of land, opening the remaining lands within the reservation to non-Indian homesteaders. With white farmers and ranchers would come more fences and guns. The bison needed to be saved from federal American policy, though many would frame it as an inevitable tide of white expansion. The Canadian government arranged to purchase and ship 708 bison from the Flathead Reservation to the ecologically disastrous Buffalo National Park near Wainwright, Alberta. Maybe Outlaw #5 was lucky; he was one of a few dozen that Pablo had killed, butchered and skinned on the land when they proved too large and “wild” to herd and load onto carts and trains. He was not wounded with buckshot by white settlers. He did not break his own neck in a frenzy as some mothers did when they were loaded onto wagons without their calves.

Outlaw #5 carries these stories in his flesh. Still, I have to ask, what does he obscure? Taxidermy obscures the bison he was. As long as his remains are stretched over the artificial form, I am distracted by the colonial act of recreating nature in the white male vision of mastery and order. As an emblem of federal conservation, he obscures Salish efforts to protect their kin, their success in creating a pocket of free and thriving bison, and the violence and suffering that followed when settler governments wrested the bison from them. The colonial story of bison conservation is one of rescue. As Pauline Wakesham puts it, conservation narratives attempt “to overwrite colonial violence” and locate it in a distant past. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation and many other signatories to the Buffalo Treaty are writing a new and yet ancient story, and it is theirs to tell. It is incumbent on us to find it.

I may have inherited the myths that came with “Outlaw #5.” I have also inherited the responsibility to peel back the myths and expose the framework supporting them so that a messy, bloody, conflict-filled truth can be known.

Michelle Willson is an inter-media artist and mother of French/English descent. She is currently a PhD candidate in Art and Visual Culture at the University of Western Ontario.

Figure 44 MAWA newsletter article pg. 2
SpookenWeb Podcast Episode “Forced Migration: Bison Stories and What They Can Tell Settlers about a Past, Present, and Future on Stolen Land”

The SpokenWeb Podcast is a monthly podcast produced by the SSHRC-funded SpokenWeb project, whose mandate is to “develop coordinated and collaborative approaches to literary historical study, digital development, and critical and pedagogical engagement with diverse collections of literary sound recordings from across Canada and beyond” (SpokenWeb). In the fall of 2021, I proposed an episode featuring the audio vignettes from my artwork Forced Migration. The production team accepted the proposal, providing me with a platform to spotlight my collaborators, poet Síle Englert who helped distill my more extended essays into shorter, affective pieces of prose, and musician and composer Angus Cruikshank whose score enriched my audio storytelling. Producing a podcast was one of my goals because it is an accessible, democratic medium that privileges aural storytelling. A highlight of my doctoral career was hosting the episode listening party and Q&A with my partner Angus. In addition, I received positive feedback from Astrida Neimanis, a scholar who has influenced and inspired my work. Please click on the image below, it will open the podcast page on your web browser.

Figure 45 SpokenWeb Podcast Episode (Photo hyperlinked to episode) Forced Migration: Bison Stories and What They Can Tell Settlers about a Past, Present, and Future on Stolen Land
The Temz Review: Interview with Andrew Heslop

Following my exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery in 2021, Kevin Heslop approached me to interview for the online literary magazine *The Temz Review*. We met where the Deshkan Ziibi forks and had a sprawling conversation, which is quite illustrative of my non-linear thinking. Kevin was intrigued by my work in audio media and suggested having actors reinterpret a transcript of our conversation. I approached actors Kristin Bennett and Damon Muma, who graciously agreed to take the parts. What followed was an audio play that was superior to the written iteration. Kristin and Damon were able to bring humour back to a text that seemed disjointed and self-important on paper. It has opened my eyes (and ears) to new strategies for aural works. Please click on the image below, it will open the interview on your web browser.

*Interview with Michelle Wilson*

*Interview conducted by Kevin Andrew Heslop, transcribed by Aidan Clark, and read by Damon Muma & Kristin Bennett*

*Figure 46 Reinterpreted Interview (Photo hyperlinked to interview): Michelle Wilson and Kevin Andrew Heslop – performed by Kristin Nelson and Damon Muma, The T3MZ Review*
Sowing Clay

*Sowing Clay* brings together communities to create a memorial to land and water defenders killed protecting the more-than-human. Paul Chartrand and I developed this collaborative project, which calls on participants from across Turtle Island to create a monumental installation. When completed, this memorial will comprise a chain of over 700 (4 x 5”) open links formed from unfired, locally gathered clay. Each link in the chain will carry one etched name and native seeds mixed into the clay body. Paul and I compiled the names of murdered environmental activists from a global context; their stories often reveal battles being fought worldwide by Indigenous peoples opposing extractionist settler-colonialism. The links resemble intertwined arms when joined together, harkening to non-violent resistance movements and protests. When we have completed the chain, links will be gifted to viewers, allowing names, stories, and seeds to disperse, carrying with them a promise to remember and honour through continued activism.

Our first series of events were held in October 2021 at Support Gallery, in partnership with *Embassy Cultural House* and the *GardenShip and State* exhibition at Museum London. This exhibition/residency allowed us to facilitate conversations around activism and decolonization and invite Indigenous and settler environmental activists to speak about local and global struggles. Participants in the workshops discussed feeling connected to the name they chose to engrave, with many researching the land defender they memorialized and learning about the struggle they died for. A long-term goal of the project is to create a community compiled database of the murdered, including the context in which they died.

Despite the difficulty of the topics engaged with by this project, we were able to include participants of all ages and backgrounds. I introduced each workshop by stating, “I want to welcome you all in the spirit of care, reciprocity, and community. It can be a radical act to engage in gestures of life, hope and renewal in the face of despair.” Coming together to do the work of memorializing felt particularly timely after over a year of pandemic isolation and loss.
Figure 47 Documentation from Sowing Clay workshop series
The After Progress exhibition curators asked artists to consider “how to reimagine human and more-than-human forms of life and ways of flourishing from the ruins of the modern idea of progress? What would counter-progressive stories sound like? What possibilities and potentialities might they make perceptible?” I responded with a video incorporating the two parallel audio narratives *Buffalo Jones* and *Fight or Flight* with panning shots of a drawing I created using archival images of bison containment, slaughter, and domestication. The dominant archive has framed efforts to control bison as an example of man’s mastery over the untamed North American West. The bison and the Indigenous peoples who lived in reciprocity with them are portrayed as necessary casualties to manifest destiny – the ultimate progress narrative. My re-mediating of the images and stories around this period questions the perceived inevitability of conquest and destruction, particularly when we reconsider the agency of all beings. The image below is linked to the online exhibition.

*Figure 48 Image from Flight or Fight & Buffalo Jones, 2021*
Michelle Wilson – CV

Education

PhD University of Western Ontario, 2016 – 2022
Art and Visual Culture – Studio Stream

MFA University of Manitoba, School of Art 2013 - 2015

BFA University of Ottawa, Visual Arts 2001 - 2005
Graduated Cum Laude

Research Experience

GardenShip and State, Artistic Research Project and Exhibition 2019-
Centre for Sustainable Curating, UWO 2021 - 2022
Rethinking Carbon Offsets for the Arts: Lead Researcher and Project Manager
Soil as a Relational Medium, Huron University College 2021 -
Lead Research and Creation Project Manager
Deep Bay Artists’ Residency, Riding Mountain National Park 2016 & 2017

Teaching Experience

University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario Sept. 2016 - 2021
Teaching Assistant, Visual Arts
Project Mentor, School for Advanced Studies in Arts and Humanities
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba Jan 2016 to May 2016
Instructor, School of Art

Community Teaching

Arts Education Classroom Experience 2018 - present
Art City 2014-2016
Winnipeg Art Gallery 2013-2016

Recent Honours and Awards

London Arts Council CAIP Grant 2022
Manitoba Arts Council Scholarship 2022
SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship 2020-2021
Ontario Graduate Scholarship 2019
David Magee Scholarship in Visual Arts 2019
Manitoba Arts Council Scholarship 2017
Graduate Thesis Research Award 2017
University of Western Ontario
Video Pool New Artist in Media Art Fund 2017
Fine Arts and Humanities Chair’s Entrance Scholarship 2016
University of Western Ontario
Fine Arts and Humanities Dean’s Entrance Scholarship 2016
University of Western Ontario
Western Graduate Research Scholarship 2016
Rosemary and Cliff Kowalsky Scholarship 2015
University of Manitoba
Manitoba Arts Council Creation and Production Grant 2015
Professor Richard Emerson Williams Graduate Scholarship 2014
Marvin and Irma Penn Scholarship in Fine Arts 2014
James B. Hartman Scholarship in Fine Arts 2014
University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship 2013

Exhibition Record

Selected Exhibitions
2022  FLESH: Embodying Praxis, AHVA Gallery, University of British Columbia
2021  **Solo Exhibition**, Outlaws, Remnants, and Wallows: Practices for Understanding Bison, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
      GardenShip and State, Museum London, ON
      After Progress, Goldsmiths University, Online
      Stop Extinction! Save the Earth, The Embassy Cultural House – Online
2020  Distance makes the heart grow weak, Art Lab Gallery, London, ON
      Suppose They Are All Put Together, Art Lab Gallery, London, ON
2018  Inward/Outward, Art Lab Gallery, London, ON
      You Can't Steal a Gift, Satellite Gallery, London, ON
      Neurocraft, Health Sciences Center, Winnipeg, MB
      Revisions, Platform Centre for photographic and digital arts, Winnipeg
2016  **Solo Exhibition**, Speciation Dance, Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg, MB
2015  **Solo Exhibition**, Ghost Heart, Cercle Moliere, Winnipeg, MB
      **Solo Exhibition**, Anima, School of Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB
      Sand in the Bellows, Platform Centre for photographic and digital arts, Winnipeg
2014  **Solo Exhibition**, VOICE: Cape Town to Nampula, Platform Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Winnipeg, MB
      Her Art Her Voice, The Edge Gallery, Winnipeg, MB
      Concerning the way in which two or more people or things are connected, Platform Centre for photographic and digital arts, Winnipeg, MB
2012  **Solo Exhibition**, A Tale of Two, DogPig Gallery, Kaohsiung, Taiwan
      Close to Home: Recent Additions to the City of Ottawa Fine Art Collection, City Hall Art Gallery, Ottawa, ON
      藝術家轟趴展, One Year Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
2011  **Solo Exhibition**, See Yourself When All Is New, Red Wall Gallery, Ottawa, ON
2009  **Solo Exhibition**, M.L.O., La Petite Mort Gallery, Ottawa, ON
      **Solo Exhibition**, Subject Imagined, Arts and Architecture Gallery, Ottawa, ON
2008  Fisher-Strikefoot-Wilson, Arts Court, Ottawa, ON
      Lust, Gallery 101, Ottawa, ON
      Black and White, Cube Gallery, Ottawa, ON

**Publications**

**Journal Publications**

**Podcast Publications**

**Scholarly Articles**

**Presentations and Invited Lectures**

**Symposium Host**, “Outlaws, Remnants, and Wallows: Practices for understanding Bison” McIntosh Gallery, 2021
**Workshop**, “Around the Kitchen Table: Artists Talk,” UnDisciplined conference, Queens University, 2021.

**Artist Residencies**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Deep Bay, Riding Mountain National Park, MB (Sept)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>New Artist in Media Art, Video Pool, Winnipeg, MB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Neurocraft, Manitoba Craft Council, Winnipeg, MB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Deep Bay, Riding Mountain National Park, MB (Aug)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>The Edge Gallery, Winnipeg, MB (Aug-Dec)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Biophilia, Chelsea, QC (May)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Professional Affiliations**

**Embassy Cultural House**, 2020-Present
Contributing Editor.

**Professional Service**

**Symposium Organizer**
“Outlaws, Remnants, and Wallows: Practices for understanding Bison” McIntosh Gallery, 2021

**Peer-Reviewed Articles for:**
- tba: Journal of Art, Media, and Visual Culture