

## From Bison Bones to the Buffalo Treaty\*

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One fall morning in 2015, I took a wrong turn on a new running route through Toronto's High Park and found myself in the park zoo. My pace slowed as I passed llamas, a grouchy looking emu, a trio of yaks, and a pair of highland cattle. I came to a full stop in front of a trio of bison, lounging in a dusty pen adjacent to an enclosure of peacocks. Jaw agape, I unzipped my jacket and paced in front of their pen. What were these massive prairie animals doing here? For months, I had been poring over old photos of bison skulls on my laptop screen as part of my dissertation research and all the while live ones were a jog away from my apartment.

I've been bison-spotting for the past few years. As a media theorist living in a city, I typically look for bison in stories, photographs, artworks, product labels, and news of herds in unexpected places, rather than in zoos or out on the prairie. My bison search began several years ago with an attempt to find a compelling example to introduce a dissertation chapter on the violence of imposing Euro-Canadian classifications on the lands, humans, and nonhumans in the prairie region of the place we now call Canada. The near extinction of bison played a pivotal role in making possible late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century settlement of the North American west. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories of this period reflect the "simultaneously parallel and entangled biographies" of humans and bison.<sup>1</sup> However, forces of colonization and capital have unevenly torqued these biographies and the nature of their entanglements. As a case study, bison extermination and its representation make clear how colonial policies have harmed animals, humans, and the relations between them. Like many research endeavors that begin with looking

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<sup>1</sup> Kirksey, S. Eben, and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no.4 (2010): 552.

for something small but keep getting bigger, I am still finding bison and listening to bison stories.

One of my first bison moments came in the Canadian Museum of History archives, through a recording that had played in *Acre of Dreams*, a temporary exhibit about “selling the west”. The text was from a lecture given by Agnes Deans Cameron, a former schoolteacher from Victoria, BC who became a publicist and promoter for immigration to western Canada at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Speaking while under contract with the Canadian government, Cameron’s lectures combined Ottawa’s desired messages of plenty with photographs she had taken two years earlier on a research trip across the west and north to the Arctic Circle. In part because they made use of a popular technology of the day—magic lantern slide projection<sup>2</sup>—Cameron’s photographs were one of the main attractions to her talk; that and, no doubt, the novelty of a woman adventurer, photographer, and reporter. Truly a one-woman show, Cameron located appropriate venues for her lectures, obtained magic lanterns and lanternists to project her slides, distributed advertising in advance of her lecture, and secured the presence of local clergymen—necessary for ensuring an air of reputability to the lectures. In one of her recorded lectures, Cameron declares: “Canada is the Mecca for the ambitious settler, who desires to become a home builder and a farm owner, who will cultivate the land among the buffalo bones and spring anemones for his own and the greater good”.<sup>3</sup> The documentation of the exhibit notes that this description of cultivation and homebuilding would have been accompanied by a photograph of two seated white men in wide-brimmed hats leaning against a sod house. Mirroring one another, their legs are crossed and their arms are folded in their laps. Stretched across the middle of the photograph, between the rectangular sod home in the background and a swath of tall flowers in the foreground, lies a mound of buffalo skulls and bones. From their seated positions, the two men look across the pile of bones toward the camera.

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<sup>2</sup> Lantern slide technology has a broader history of mediating empire and visualizing links between people, place, and notions of citizenship. At the same time that Cameron and others were using slides and lectures to sell Canadian settlement, the British government’s Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee produced and circulated lantern slides and accompanying lectures to teachers across the British empire to teach schoolchildren about imperial citizenship. See Gabrielle Moser, *Projecting Citizenship: Photography and Belonging in the British Empire* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Acre of Dreams* exhibition notes, Zone 2: “Selling the Promised Land, 1870s-1920s”, Section 2.3: “Lecturers – A. D. Cameron”, Canadian Museum of History archives file 2006-H0042, pg 15.



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"The Beginning of Better Things. Buffalo Bone in the Foreground"

Figure 1: "The Beginning of Better Things", Charles W. Mathers, 1900 (Near Lloydminster, AB). Image courtesy of Peel's Prairie Provinces, a digital initiative of the University of Alberta Libraries.

Sitting in the brightly lit, beige reading room of the museum's archive, I was struck by a dissonance between Cameron's description of the prairie as empty and the pile of skulls—stacked knee-deep—in the photograph. While her words were meant to convey the blank slate on which British settlers could build a new life, the pile of bones was a grisly reminder that these prairie lands had been teeming with life. Settlers and the architects of colonial policy may not have recognized it at the time, but the work of bison herds was critical to the richness of desired prairie lands. The pile of skulls signifies the loss of bison, displaced from the land in order to be re-placed by homesteads, new agricultural development, and herds of cattle. But skulls also represented the loss of grazing, wallowing, and migrating practices that make the land hospitable for a host of other species—from microbes and dung beetles to birds and rodents, not to mention human communities.

I later came to learn that this photograph, misattributed to Cameron in the museum's archive, is the work of Edmonton-based photographer C. W. Mathers, taken in 1900. Like Cameron's use of the image, Mathers also circulated the photograph to celebrate and sell settlement in the prairies. Reproduced first as a postcard and later in an album commemorating the founding of the province of Alberta, Mathers's photo was captioned "The Beginning of Better Things." The implication being that these promised "better things", which Cameron also described, could only begin in earnest after the land was emptied of bison.

Mathers's photograph unexpectedly transported me home. The sod house and stack of bison bones was likely within a few hundred kilometres of the town I was raised in, Spruce Grove, Alberta, which I had left more than a decade ago (on my own search for better things). Cameron's pitch for the open futures available on the prairies was made in a different context, but the attraction of life in the west was still resonant decades later. When my parents made their way west in the 1980s (my mother from the Laurentians, my father from Sweden by way of a childhood in downtown Toronto), Alberta still offered the appeals of adventure and affordable housing. The attraction of western landscapes that pulled at my parents' imaginations had echoes of early 20<sup>th</sup> boosterism, a few generations removed. These pitches for the prairies were made possible by policies of plains clearance in the 1800s. The near-extirmination of the bison and arrival of early settlers resulted in countless scenes mirroring the one captured in Mathers's photograph, but also in the creation of reserves, residential schooling, targeted campaigns of malnutrition and starvation, forced sterilization, and direct and indirect policies of assimilation—all of which aimed to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands and to disavow Indigenous sovereignty. The piled up bison bones in Mathers's photograph signal the liveliness of the prairie, but also show us one of the key processes in radically disrupting the lifeways that preceded settler arrivals. Given that they were the centre of the plains landscape ecosystem and of plains Indigenous communities, the radical elimination of bison herds destabilized all modes of life in the region—and the relationships between them. The photograph of the two men and their contributions towards “the beginning of better things” is also an image of the relations displaced in that process.

Growing up in a manufactured place, where the older neighborhoods were built in the 1960s but the public school Social Studies curriculum fixated on the labours of late 19<sup>th</sup> century settlers and even earlier “explorers”, I sought material signs of History everywhere. Between the ages of eight and ten, I regularly visited the narrow strip of manicured woods that formed a border between our subdivision and neighboring farms. I was fixated by the foundation of a rectangular structure, overgrown with grasses, in a small meadow at the edge of these woods. I was convinced that this was a link to a hidden history, to something that would make this place interesting. The bellows of cattle that occasionally grazed at a fence a few meters away from this promise of meaningful history should have been a clue to the banality of the scene: just decades earlier, this parkland was farmland. Now when I think back to the sunken foundation of that shed, I find myself asking about what else lies below the suburban creep of redeveloped farmland. What of the Cree and Métis communities, as well as bison herds, removed from this land so that it might be prepared for “the beginning of better things?” The cul-de-sacs and recreation paths of my hometown are part of the vast territory covered by Treaty Six. The Cree chiefs who shared their ceremonies with the Crown's men at Fort Edmonton on August 21, 1877 sought to secure the means of survival for their communities in the wake of bison extermination and disease. A landscape that had been shaped by bison for generations was mapped and divided in their absence. As the loss of bison kin was mourned, terms for sharing the land with British and other European-descended newcomers were established. These terms were rooted in reciprocity. The generosity of the assembled Cree nations during a time of profound loss created the legal relationship that made possible the place in Alberta that my parents eventually called home.

While I slowly amassed photographs of buffalo bones and read more about the history of violence they represented, I was living in Toronto—far from the prairies and a world away from bison herds (past or present). My formal research moved away from bison during that season, but

visiting the High Park bison became part of my routine. Sometimes I would give them a brief glance while jogging by, other times stopping for a quick photograph. Occasionally I would stop at the bench across from the pen for half an hour at a time, watching children run up to the fence or parents patiently introduce the mom, dad, and baby bison to their toddlers. Despite growing up on the prairies, this urban trio is the only bison herd I have ever had any sustained interaction with.



Figure 2: Jasper (left) and Victoria (right) in High Park Zoo, Toronto. Source: Danielle Taschereau Mamers

One afternoon, while approaching the pen, I pulled off my headphones in time to hear the zookeeper tell an inquiring girl and her father that the two adult bison were named Jasper and Victoria, but that the zoo staff hadn't quite settled on a name for the young one. Smiling at the coincidence that these two were named after towns I had lived in during my early 20s, I sat down and watched them for nearly an hour. As Victoria and her calf took turns moving between hay bale and water bucket, Jasper dozed under a tree. Sadness crept over me as I watched them negotiate life in such a confined space, where large stretches of dirt were only occasionally broken by scrubby patches of grass and their hooves clotted loudly on a concrete pad as they moved between their provided food and drink. I thought of the grassy meadow beyond the zoo gates, and how they belonged there more than here. This trio—the smallest possible herd—made me think of only children, whom I often felt a twinge of pity for when reflecting on the loud household I grew up in and the rambunctious sprawl of my extended family. And yet, despite my melancholy, I was still glad these three were here. It gave me the selfish opportunity to meet them, to create more context for the skulls piled up in my growing collection of old photographs. These bison connect the country's largest city to prairie landscapes some 3000 kilometers

northwest. The photographed bones resonated as traces of animal loss and the broader destruction of relations and disavowal of sovereignty in the west. But the High Park bison, dropped into the middle of Toronto, thousands of kilometers from their natural habitat, are evidence, or at least symbols, of the intra-colonial circulation of bodies and capital that has both scarred and intimately shaped the histories of this country.

The more I tried to make sense of this as a person and a scholar, the more I realized that digging up photos of bones and gawking at fenced-in zoo animals was part of a broader search to untangle and understand the place I had grown up, the histories that had been left out of my public school and undergraduate education, and the many kinds of calculated losses forced upon nations, herds, and landscapes just to allow generations of settlers to flourish. The opportunities sold in Cameron's lectures or Mathers's photographs came at the cost of free-ranging bison herds, their grassland pasture, and their migration routes. But also at the loss of those they shared the land with—the Blackfoot, Cree, Métis, Nakoda, Salish, and many other nations whose spiritual, physical, cultural, and political worlds were sustained by the continent's buffalo. Cree theorist and filmmaker Tasha Hubbard has carefully documented the effects of these losses, displacements, and—crucially—survivals for both plains Indigenous nations and bison herds.<sup>4</sup>

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“Have you heard about these bison going back to Blackfeet territory?” It was a brief email from a colleague with a link to a CBC news story about the transfer of bison from Elk Island National Park to the Blackfeet reservation in Montana.<sup>5</sup> The news shifted something in my bison-spotting. Until I received that email in February 2016, I hadn't given much thought to the bison of Elk Island. They are one of the largest conservation herds on the continent, but up to this point they had felt like an analogue to the trio I visited in High Park. While many hundreds of animals larger in size, the Elk Island herd was still fenced, still cared for by public employees, still offered to visitors as a living testament to a distant past—mammalian ghosts.

The news of some of these Elk Island bison leaving the park, crossing national borders, and returning to their ancestral territories sparked my thinking about bison as contemporary political agents. The transfer had been advocated for by the signatory nations to the Buffalo Treaty—an agreement written by Leroy Little Bear and Amethyst First Rider of the Kainai Nation in dialogue with elders and initially signed by eight different Indigenous nations and bands, four north and four south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. Today the Treaty has 21 signatories. Rather than a project primarily propelled by relations between Canadian and American national parks policies or prompted by the need to transfer animals to ensure genetic diversity in conservation herds, Indigenous sovereignty and cultural resurgence was at the forefront of the April 2016 transfer of 87 animals. In a moment of conversations across Canada about reconciliation and un-settlement, the Buffalo Treaty offers a way to think about these processes on a local, material scale. Returning bison to their homelands—lands shared with the Blackfeet Nation—is a small step towards nurturing collaborations and negotiations that might lead to better relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Crucially, as Tasha Hubbard writes, “the recovery of

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<sup>4</sup> Tasha Hubbard, “Buffalo Genocide in Nineteenth Century North America: ‘Kill, Skin, and Sell,’” in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America*, edited by Andrew Woolford, Jeff Benvenuto, and Alexander Laban Hinton, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 292-305.

<sup>5</sup> CBC News, “Elk Island Bison Calves Return to Montana's Blackfoot County,” February 22, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.3458486> (accessed February 23, 2016).

the buffalo can help repair and renew understandings of Indigenous sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> The idea of live bison (in a gang much larger than three) moving freely on their home ranges rather than fixating on documents of their ancestors’ bones was thrilling. In the news of this small herd’s move there was a different kind of energy. There were uncertain but open futures. There was life.

The 2016 transfer mattered to more than just the Blackfoot peoples who welcomed them home. At the American Bison Society conference later that fall, which I attended, Leroy Little Bear, Tasha Hubbard, Paulette Fox and other representatives from several prairie Indigenous nations discussed the importance of the Buffalo Treaty and the symbolic and material importance of having some of the Elk Island bison return to their homelands. Parks Canada and US Fish and Wildlife representatives and conservation groups were also invested in the project and its success. To have bison back in a place they’ve been absent from, conservationist Wes Olsen told the audience, would help sustain life for countless species of bacteria, insects, frogs, and birds, as well as shifting the root structures of the plants they grazed upon in ways that would create a more hospitable home in the grasslands for many other animals. To have bison back in Blackfoot territory, Tasha Hubbard told us as she shared footage of the February 2016 repatriation, was to welcome family home. Many languages were spoken and translations offered—from Siksika and English to genomics, wildlife biology, and commercial production. While participants enmeshed in different systems of knowledge, belief, and history at times struggled to fully make sense of one another, the overwhelming feeling was one of shared enthusiasm and a mutual willingness to help.

One afternoon in early July 2018, I drove from Calgary to a Starbucks on the outskirts of Lethbridge to talk bison with Paulette Fox, a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy from the Kainai nation, knowledge holder, and a leader in the movement to restore free-ranging bison to the prairies. In a measured tone that balanced warmth and committed earnestness, she told me the story of how the Iinii Initiative—a Blackfoot movement to bring back bison—had begun with dialogues between elders and her environmental team on the Kainai reserve, emphasizing that relationships were at the heart of her work with buffalo. Gathering community input, building consensus on the desire to see buffalo return to the broader Blackfoot territory, and eventually moving forward with the Buffalo Treaty, were activities that emphasized the importance of relations with the buffalo, but also relations within the community. The conversations and collaboration that emerged from this process on the Blood reserve and beyond was not just bringing bison back to the land, but about nurturing relationships. Within her community, these relationships took the form of elevating elders’ knowledge, singing songs that had not been sung for many years, and recommitting to the guiding principles their ancestors had gleaned from carefully observing and living alongside the buffalo.

These relations went further, though, as repatriation conversations gathered support from members of the conservation community, scientists, and even far-removed bison-spotters like myself. From Fox’s perspective, the mutual gains made through communication and collaboration across groups to meet the goal of buffalo return also offered a valuable teaching tool about coexistence. The goals of Parks Canada biologists and Blackfoot elders or youth do not always mirror each other, but they intersect in the primary desire to have free-ranging bison on grassland territories. Despite taking different forms and using different methods the desire for

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<sup>6</sup> Tasha Hubbard, *The Call of the Buffalo: Exploring Kinship with the Buffalo in Indigenous Creative Expression*, (Doctoral thesis, University of Calgary, 2016), 184.

relations with bison enabled new collaborations between Indigenous and Western expertise. As she finished her careful explanation of her community's work with the buffalo and inter-nation collaboration, Fox paused and looked across the table. She broke the silence with intent certainty: "The buffalo are everything for us, they are the centre of everything."

The three bison I continue to visit in High Park are a vestige both of early bison conservation and colonial economics. In the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only a few hundred wild bison remained and early conservationists struggled to find ways to ensure the continuation of the species. One tactic was to preserve the bodies of bison in taxidermy displays, so that future generations might know of the existence of the animals that shaped the land and life on the prairies. Another was zoo herds, where small groups of bison would be cared for as living monuments to the bison of the past. Designed to offer encounters with confined spectacles of wildlife in urban spaces, zoos are also sites where the material spoils of colonial exchange are displayed. Opened to house deer in 1893, the High Park zoo acquired bison in 1908. For 120 years, bison have lived alongside a motley menagerie that has housed llama, wallaby, reindeer, camel, emu, ostrich, capybara, elk, and other creatures exotic and domestic. Housing these animals together reflects the prestige that comes with the financial capacity to acquire an array of beasts from the outer reaches of the northwest and beyond and to assemble them in the heart of a city. It created a space to learn about the animals of home and abroad. And it stitched Toronto's urban centre into a map of empire formed with animal bodies.

The bison who arrived in High Park in 1908 may have been some of the first of their species to enter the city alive, but they'd have certainly been preceded by a flow of bison bodies and their parts. In the early-1800s, bison hides moved by waterways from the west through the urbanizing east and onwards to European markets. After the decimation of herds, the circulation of animal capital took the form of sun-bleached bones hauled out of fields-made-farmland. Mounds of bones, like those piled up in the Mathers photograph, would have been loaded onto railcars across the prairies and bound for the eastern factories that would render skeleton into fertilizer, glue, and ash for bone china. From my seat on the bench across from Victoria, Jasper, and the calf, I hear the commuter train clatter along the train tracks south of the park and wonder about how many thousands of bisons' bones must have travelled along those same tracks—proceeds from which circulated through Bay Street bank accounts—more than a century ago.

Bison conservation efforts over the last century on the part of Indigenous communities, national park systems, conservation biologists, and wildlife advocates have ensured the survival of the species on the continent. When I watch the trio of bison mill around their pen in the park, it is tempting to see them only as symbols of life elsewhere—either lost life in the past or a shadow of their kin who range more freely in the west. Cast as remnants of a distant past, salvage approaches consign communities (human and nonhuman alike) to status as objects of knowledge rather than subjects enmeshed in the process of becoming, relating, and surviving. Conservation stories and other histories that fixate on extinction fail to grasp the unfinished nature of colonization and foreclose histories of survival. While displaced from the prairie landscapes of their ancestors and enclosed in an urban setting distant from their relations, the High Park bison are enmeshed in such histories of survival. These three bison are very much alive. As they tread back and forth across their pen, wallow in the dirt, and cyclically graze and fertilize, they work on the small patch of land afforded to them and make it hospitable to a host of other creatures. On May 5, 2018, Victoria gave birth to a calf. Also born at High Park, Victoria has given birth to three calves in her tiny urban range. When female bison give birth for the first time, they form a



connection to the land and while herds may travel vast distances, the pull of birthing places draws mothers back.

The illustrated sign attached to the chain link enclosure identifies Victoria, Jasper, and the calf as members of the *Bison bison bison* species. This herd may have been brought to the park zoo to live as symbols of their species, and of plains bison life in other times and other places, but they are also known to their Cree, Blackfoot, and Nakoda relations as paskwâwimostos, iinnii, and tâtâga. In doing the work of staying alive, these bison are viscerally connected to this scrubby patch of fenced city grass. But they are also a link to their ancestors who sustained life on the prairie for generations and to their contemporary relations whose movement across Cree, Blackfoot, and Nakoda territory are aiding in the resurgence of these communities. The responsibilities articulated in the Buffalo Treaty reflect the careful work of more than 20 Indigenous communities to restore their relationship with their bison relations. Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners reported in their executive summary that elders from across the country impressed upon them that “reconciliation will never occur unless we are also reconciled with the earth.”<sup>7</sup> Collaborative efforts to return bison to their ancestral territories—to Montana in 2016 and to Banff in 2017—offer an example of one path towards redress for the radical loss inflicted on human and nonhuman communities at the hands of settlement policies that promised the beginning of better things.

The generations of urban bison who have paced the pens of the High Park Zoo have tended to their patch of sandy soil that was once an ancient lakebed in the same ways their ancestors and relations tend to prairie landscapes. When I sit and watch this small trio through the chain link fence, I sometimes wonder if in this patient tending they are doing diplomatic work. Though they were brought here and continue to be kept here largely as a practice of colonial exhibitionism, their persistence might also be a refusal to be contained by these terms. The biographies of these three animals are parallel to and enmeshed with histories of reciprocal relations with prairie landscapes and plains nations, as well as histories of colonial violence. Despite the containment strategies of salvage conservation and colonial exhibition, the lives of these bison in the heart of Toronto are part of larger continuities of life and relations in the face of radical displacement.

As I watch the calf butting and tossing a fallen oak branch under the shade of the tree, I feel both present in the young animal’s curious play in its urban home and transported back to the landscape of my childhood. How many times had such a scene played out in the vast stretches of Treaty Six and beyond? And yet, in the wake of radical loss and transformation, these three continue to make their lives far from their ancestral home. In living and birthing and treading this urban land, the High Park bison also remind visitors that colonial inheritances, responsibilities, and possible paths toward better relations are not just walked *out there*—on the land among the buffalo bones—but also have a place *here*. More than ghosts of the vast herds that came before them, these urban bison embody a refusal to disappear.

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<sup>7</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, (Ottawa: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 18.