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# Fight or flight: reimagining Charles Jesse “Buffalo” Jones’ conservation efforts through a bison’s embodied perspective

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In this speculative historical essay, 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 “fictocriticism” deploys 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. The essay briefly introduces Jones and his contentious legacy as a murderer of Indigenous peoples, buffalo hunter and, later, a central figure in early bison conservation. The essay then shifts into a first-person account of the pursuit and capture of the last remaining southern plains bison from the Texas Panhandle from a cow’s embodied perspective. The bison’s first-person perspective as one of Jones’ prey brings an immediacy to a history that has often been retold to center man’s mastery and supremacy. Finally, this essay employs footnotes as a critical intervention by connecting the speculative narrative to Jones’ written accounts in published journals. These two narrative approaches demonstrate the significance of bison kinship and how anthropocentrism and white supremacy’s entangled ideologies blinded Jones to the worthiness of these others’ lifeways. The written submission is accompanied by two audio artworks based on this essay. In creating affective, sound-designed audio works, I have intentionally extracted the archival-research-based narrative from a white supremacist, a patriarchal written tradition for critical purposes.

## KEYWORDS

bison, conservation, decolonial, anti-colonial, fictocriticism, affect, critical anthropomorphism

## Introduction

As wildfires continue to ravage vast areas of the planet and hundreds of species face the risk of extinction every year, it has become evident that conservation’s conventional tools, such as parks and protected areas, may not be enough to prevent global catastrophe (Ceballos et al., 2017). In a special report by the Yellowhead Institute, [Wale \(2023\)](#) poses a crucial question: how can we depend on policies created by the same individuals who use the same knowledge systems that have contributed to the climate crisis and still expect different outcomes? Wale’s question prompts me to ask how the conservation sector can transform itself and its ways of knowing to imagine a different future.

The first step toward bringing about transformative change is to acknowledge the fact that territories governed by Indigenous Peoples have been equally, if not more, successful in terms of conservation outcomes compared to those managed by state governments. The future of conservation lies in Indigenous leadership (Stevens, 2014; ICE, 2018). This decolonial change does not mean that Western biological sciences have no role; rather, it necessitates reordering ontologies and epistemologies to foreground Indigenous governance, knowledge systems, and law. One proposed methodology is to braid ways of knowing by intertwining “science, spirit, and story,” as Potawatomi botanist Kimmerer (2013) suggests.

How can we act upon this imperative to reorder our understanding as non-Indigenous scholars invested in a just and flourishing world?<sup>1</sup> Settler-colonial ways of knowing attempt to decontextualize, quantify, and isolate beings into taxonomies (Mamers, 2019). These ontological strategies have resulted in an exploitative relationship with the world because they frame humans as sentient masters surrounded by inert resources. For instance, such ontologies enabled the decimation of the bison in the late 19th century and the many ill-fated conservation schemes that followed (Brower, 2008; Mamers, 2020). Settler scholars need to adopt an anti-colonial framework that can help us re-story the past, acknowledge our kinship with the more than human, and connect these realities to yet-unrealized futures. In this unconventional essay, I model fictocriticism as one such approach to braided storytelling.

Fictocriticism layers narrative, theory, data, and criticism to create a polyvocal form of writing that allows the text to slip between disciplinary boundaries in productive ways. These multiple subjectivities communicate at times in harmony and at others in discord to critically disrupt “the paralyzing interdictions of disciplinary academic authority” (Gibbs, 2005). It models braided ways of knowing by allowing voices from multiple epistemologies to operate in dialogue with one another without subsuming or assimilating one into another. Similarly, Anishinaabe systems thinking scholar Melanie Goodchild calls for new models of discourse; her example is a two-row visual code embodied in the two-row wampum, which can allow for a respectful coexistence between ways of thinking and knowing and an exploration of the “sacred space” in between (Goodchild, 2021).

In addition, fictocriticism manifests relational, enmeshed ways of knowing grounded in the author’s lived experiences; its attention to subjectivity and a multiplicity of narrative registers enacts a feminist epistemology that rejects the pretense of “point-of-viewlessness” but instead values “situated knowledges” that speak, authentically at the intersection “of multiple systems of domination” (TallBear, 2015). This mode of address and its reliance on storytelling creates openings for engagement often foreclosed by abstract theoretical writing. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

1 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.

has expressed how, in Indigenous epistemologies, storytelling has always been understood as an effective way of mobilizing knowledge 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 (2014).

This generation of meaning will never result in an arrival at a demystification of the material world because, as Haraway (1988) warns us, knowledge is not a thing to be mastered but an engagement with an always-shifting, vibrant world. What possibilities exist if we allow curiosity and humility to creep into the professional edicts of objective, masterful authority? I pose this question as an artist, an outsider. At its best, artistic practice is a groping toward apprehension while acknowledging that we will never bridge the gap between the incomprehensible and complete understanding.

The following stories, “Buffalo Jones” and “Fight or Flight,” employ several registers (i.e., audio storytelling - see [supplementary material](#), first-person narrative, formally formatted footnotes) to convey multiple subjectivities, but also the layered ways of knowing necessary to live in a pluriverse. These two sections demonstrate the significance of bison kinship and how the entangled ideologies of anthropocentrism and white supremacy settlers to the worthiness of these others’ lifeways. The central text purposefully adopts a subjective storytelling position, while the footnotes interject theoretical and historical context in an academic voice.

In “Fight or Flight,” I use intimacy, embodiment and affect to subvert the archives.<sup>2</sup> In this section, I analyzed quotes from Jones’ journals, including his observations of bison behavior and his capture strategies (I included these quotes in the footnotes). I then interpreted Jones’ narration by comparing it with the deep bison knowledge of wildlife conservation manager and writer Wes Olson while mixing in some of my experiences as a mammal practicing mothering. These historical,

2 A Foucauldian perspective helps one see that the archive is not a transparent store from which to recover histories (Ballantyne, 2001). These stories and their preservation in the dominant archive were always already discursive. Discursive texts are not neutral transmissions of facts; they are born out of and support ideology. In this case, that ideology is decidedly white supremacist and colonial. We must view Jones’ narratives in connection to the mobilization of state power that was occurring in tandem with them. 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 within which I am myself implicated. The pairing of “Buffalo Jones” and “Fight or Flight” points to the fact that archives “serve as tools for both oppression and liberation” (Caswell et al., 2017).

contemporary, and embodied sources allowed me to construct a first-person, more-than-human narration of bison capture. In part, I achieved this ecocentric shift by imagining the world from a perspective that relies primarily on smell and hearing instead of sight.

The writing in “Buffalo Jones” and “Fight or Flight” enacts some of the complexity settlers must embrace when trying to know beings, like bison, with whom we are culturally, socially, ecologically, and historically enmeshed. I am addressing my settler readers because non-hierarchical imbricated understandings of the more-than-human have always been rooted in many Indigenous ontological traditions (Belcourt, 2014). I end the essay by discussing how affect can destabilize colonial logics and narratives and how, in relinquishing the illusion of a reconciled past, we can begin imagining a decolonial conservation future.

## Buffalo Jones

### I.

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. However, 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 and Brown, 1961). 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, 2018).

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, 2018). He willed this city into existence.

The false-front buildings burned to the ground in a devastating 1883 fire (ibid). 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 (ibid). In the eye of the storm, after the blizzard of 1886 but before Jones’ financial ruin, he began collecting bison calves in earnest.

But Jones got his nickname a decade before he ever “rescued” a bison calf, in 1876, when he was a hide hunter (Easton and Brown, 1961). 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,<sup>3</sup> A ~~Numanuu~~ leader (Comanche) 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 had set up a stand in the canyon. He was picking off a herd one by one. He had killed 21 bison when several Numanuu men put a stop to it. A few days later, fellow hide hunters found his body ringed by the bloated and untouched bison corpses (ibid).

The indignant white hunters organized their revenge (ibid). Forty-five of them descended on the Numanuu families. By this time, the Numanuu band had been joined by an Apache band, swelling their numbers to 300. Despite their numerical and tactical superiority, the Numanuu 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 300 yards; her devoted kin “would linger and wait until the last one could be easily slain.” Alternatively, 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, 1899).

By the hunters’ calculations, they killed 35 Indigenous people and wounded 22. The white hunters toasted one another around the campfire when the carnage was over. 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 and Brown, 1961).

The first time he was called “Buffalo Jones,” it was because he had killed humans the way he killed bison.<sup>4</sup>

3 Tu-ukumah was also known as Black Horse and Pako-Riah (Colt) or Ta-Peka (Sun Rays) amongst his people (Anderson, 2021).

4 In the conflation of the slaughter of Indigenous peoples and bison, we see how, as theorist Aph Ko points out, the logic and systems of white supremacy have labelled both as animals in relation to the white human. In a chapter titled “Buffalo Genocide in Nineteenth-Century North America: Kill, Skin, Sell,” Hubbard (2014) 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.”

Hubbard troubles the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples by arguing for an expansive understanding of personhood and that the extirpation of the bison constitutes an act of genocide (ibid). While Hubbard 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,” arguing that “according to Indigenous ways of knowing, humans do not hold exclusive title to personhood, and therefore neither to genocide” (ibid). Understanding the trauma of the bison slaughter by government actors and hide hunters should not be limited to killing. These forces also removed calves and destroyed familial relationships. These calves

## 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. He did not regret his murder of human beings; rather, he regretted his contribution to the near extermination of the buffalo.<sup>5</sup> This is the only sin he laments in his memoir, another of his PR efforts.

Jones believed there was no place for wild bison on their former ranges.<sup>6</sup> 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, 1899).

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).

The 1886 blizzard that triggered the collapse of Garden City also inspired Jones' bison domestication scheme. Jones (1899) noted that "the snow was twisted and hurled into the air leaving the ground bare, where it was completely pulverized by the energy

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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 (ibid).

5 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 with animals was clearly intertwined with his white supremacist worldview (Jones, 1899).

6 It is important to note that it is colonialism's foundational misconception that North America was a place of unmanaged "wilderness." As settler ethnobotanist, Turner (2014) points out, "the biological character and diversity of North America bears the indelible imprint of long-term Indigenous management and stewardship." 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" (ibid). 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, 2018). Essentially, the Doctrine of Discovery, or *terra nullius* as it is also known, claimed that because no sovereign nations occupied these lands, they could be claimed for Christian Monarchs; it codified a "perceived right of conquest" (Woolford et al., 2014). The Doctrine of Discovery was followed by the *vacuum domicilium* doctrine, established in 1692 by the governor of Massachusetts Bay, John Winthrop (Turner, 2014). 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, 2014).

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." 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 (ibid).

And so, Jones set out to capture the last 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 14 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.

Twelve milk cows accompanied the men and horses on the second expedition 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. 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 2 h 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, 1899). The surrogates arrived in time to save some of them. Seven made it to Garden City.

The third expedition 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 (ibid).

The fourth and final expedition 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 25, where there would have been hundreds in the past, 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.

Jones and his crew found a herd of 20 cows and a bull at the Palo Duro River's headwaters. With horses and bloodhounds, they were able to drive them for 4 days to their base camp.<sup>7</sup> In this panicked state, the bison would not 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 (ibid). 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" (ibid).

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 25 of his domesticated bison, and drove them 200 miles to meet their conquered kin.<sup>8</sup>

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, 1899).

It seems that the draw of their domesticated kin was not enough to override the blood memory of place passed down through generations.<sup>9</sup> 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 42 days and nights. Desperate to circle them back, they charged the cows at least 20 times. The bison became thin and footsore. The men could often follow them by "the blood left in their tracks" (ibid).

It seems the bison could do nothing 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 17 of the cows. Eight died within the first 24 h, suffering seizures, stiffening limbs, and then collapse (ibid). 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.

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., 2019). 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 them. The bison would never be truly domesticated.

Jones sold his bison to Michel Pablo who maintained a herd on the Flathead reservation in Montana in 1893 (Markewicz, 2017).

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.

## Fight or Flight

*Archives contain what can be said within discourse, and discourse forms and is formed by ideology. In this section, I switch my narrative voice to that of a bison*

construction of race as hereditary and essential (hard-heredity) and not a social construct is perpetuated 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" (ibid). 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" (ibid). This understanding is fascinating to consider in light of recent moves to cull and breed our way to 'genetically pure' bison in an attempt to resurrect pre-colonial contact bison (Tait, 2020). Epigenetics point to the danger of such a narrow and fixed understanding of bison.

7 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 direction (Barsh and Marlor, 2003). Working with nature was not Jones' way. The only path he could see was how to make nature work for him.

8 Amongst the 25 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, 1995).

9 Here, I allude to the power of epigenetic inheritance as a conveyor of what Indigenous traditional knowledge systems recognize as "blood memory" (Unreserved, 2015). Epigenetics studies the effects of environmental factors on gene expression. Epigenetic changes do not alter the genetic sequence but can be inherited by offspring (Paul, 2020). 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, 2015).

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, 2020). 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" (ibid). Like Paul, I see epigenetics as a potential site for decolonization in the sciences.

Epigenetics is 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, 2017). This ideological

cow, employing 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. This work of fictocriticism employs empathy to recenter the more-than-human voice. It ironically uses the observations of the bison's tormentor to move beyond a simplistic anthropomorphic representation towards "critical anthropomorphism," braiding together scientific and empathetic approaches to acknowledge other animals as individual feeling agental beings rather than indistinguishable machines (Karlsson, 2012).

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.<sup>10</sup>

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 calves arrived.

There are so few babies now. We cannot let down our guard to breed as we used to. Two emaciated bulls<sup>11</sup> follow us but they barely have the energy to register when we are in estrus.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

We have learned<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

The earth has been dry for so long.<sup>16</sup>

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.

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.<sup>17</sup>

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 toward the wind.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

I am leading my sisters when I scent them.

Urine and sweat and dead skin wafts toward me on a breeze exhaled from a canyon mouth. I turn and lead some of my sisters and their young onto an open prairie.<sup>21</sup>

My instincts have betrayed me, betrayed us.

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.<sup>22</sup>

10 "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, 1899).

11 "The bulls were very poor and shaggy" (ibid).

12 "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 12 cows" (ibid).

13 "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" (ibid).

14 George Millward McDougall, a Methodist missionary and founder of the McDougall Residential School in Alberta, purportedly recorded a Blackfoot law: "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, 1896).

15 "The buffalo were scattered to the four winds, and hide away in deep cañons [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, 1899).

16 "It appears there has been no rain in this desert for years past" (ibid).

17 "The day broke dark and drizzling" (ibid).

18 "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" (ibid).

19 "Nearer and nearer he approached the frightened little brutes, which now seeing they were pursued, strained every nerve to escape" (ibid).

20 "The bulls were very poor and shaggy, soon dropping out, leaving the 12 cows, which by the third day of the chase became so gentle we could ride within two hundred yards of them without any difficulty" (ibid).

21 "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" (ibid).

22 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

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 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.

Terror. Thrashing. Fighting. I must stand.

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> 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" (ibid).

<sup>24</sup> 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, 2020).

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, 2021). Another larger stone was found with a grid pattern, which usually represents an out-of-body experience associated with vision quests (Selkirk, 2021). 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 emphasizes the importance 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, 2021).

galloped past him and the calf "began to dangle like a rubber ball on a string" (ibid).

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.

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.

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...

## Discussion

A fundamental methodology in “fictocritical” writing is being attuned to resonances; the narratives above emerged from resonances between a bison hunter's journals and my embodied experiences as a mother. I was struck by another resonance with these stories when I heard poet and biologist J. Drew Lanham say that in telling conservation stories, we must relinquish our reliance on the “soft landing of hope.” Sometimes, he said, “We need to let [our hearts] go ahead and break on despair” (Lanham, 2020). In forcing the stories we hear in conservation spaces into nice, hopeful, and inevitable ones, settlers obscure so much past and ongoing harm. In needing comfort, we obfuscate and never confront the worldviews that perpetuate these harms; this is the danger of confusing *niceness* and *kindness*.

The research I undertook in writing this, and several other stories connected to bison conservation, made it clear to me that the white supremacist and anthropocentric ways of knowing that I inherited endeavor to 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 (Stevens, 2014). As Indigenous writers and activists Dragon Smith and Grandjambe note, parks were both formed by and perpetuated this worldview, like museum exhibits, they are “meant to be preserved and admired, but not wholly participated in. That [doesn't] leave much room for us, the people who [live] here”

(Dragon Smith and Grandjambe, 2020). Through the work I have presented in this article, I have attempted to convey how bison and all our more-than-human relations resist this flattening and instrumentalizing of their being.

I continue to unlearn these ways of knowing, guided by Indigenous ways of relating to human and more-than-human kin. However, 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 (Tuck and Yang, 2014). While I am actively working to understand worldviews that I was not born into, I acknowledge my limitations; truly understanding Indigenous ontologies, in all their evolving complexity, is 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 (Tuihawai Smith, 2012).

Western biological science has caught up to the Indigenous understanding that “when bison are present, they hold together a world of relations” (Mamers, 2021). Not only amongst the plant and animal species which flourish in the wake of their wallowing and grazing or the microbial beings that their digestive systems distribute across ecosystems but in the spiritual, cultural, and material relations they hold with Indigenous nations, particularly to those that have signed the Buffalo Treaty (Olson, 2019).<sup>25</sup> White settlers, in their desire for bison bones and hides and to destabilize Indigenous governments, destroyed these webs of connections so that European lifeways could thrive (Mamers, 2021). The preceding sections, “Buffalo Jones” and “Fight or Flight,” attempt to narrate how seemingly past ontologies continue to structure our present. It presents a methodology for braided ways of knowing that may enable those in the conservation sector to envision and work toward a reconciled, decolonial future, not with massive swaths of land walled off from human use and intervention, as they often are in parks, but to restore the cultural, spiritual, and economic relationships between humans, animals, plants, and land under principles of reciprocity (Stevens, 2014). As Danielle Tashereau Mamers describes it, this transformation is not a return to the past but rather envisioning life in a scarred landscape by “materializing decolonial justice in communities and places disrupted by settler colonization.”

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

<sup>25</sup> 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).



mine did so many times in making this work, may be the shock we need to learn that we humans are not masters of the world but instead 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.

## Author contributions

MW researched, wrote, and performed all elements of this article. The sound design of [Supplementary material](#) by Angus Cruikshank.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1221078/full#supplementary-material>

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