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Reclaiming Indigenous Identity through Animal Advocacy In Art: Adrian Stimson and Dana Claxton

> **If you had to pick an animal that was going to be the soul of your existence, the one thing that made life possible, you would be hard pressed to choose better than the North American plains bison (*Bison bison bison*). – Jack Brink (*Imagining Head-Smashed-In* 46)**

Introduction. Early modern European colonizers who arrived in North America were already experiencing a sense of disconnection from the natural world and its inhabitants, yet animals have always remained at the center of First Nations cultures, traditions, spirituality and identity. Roger Boyd writes that a harmonious relationship between human and non-human animals is at the core of Indigenous ways of life and identity ("The Indigenous and Modern Relationship between People and Animals"). Furthermore, "Indigenous hunter-gatherer societies treat other animals as fully sentient beings which have equal status to humans, and must be shown respect [especially] when they are hunted" (Boyd). Indigenous beliefs attribute spiritual qualities to animals that elevate their social position; "The Cree also share the view of animals as having souls, and experiencing rebirth, in the same way that humans do." The buffalo[1] in particular is an animal that has co-existed alongside many Plains Indigenous tribes and is regarded with the utmost respect.[2] The Plains Indigenous call the buffalo by several names in various languages, distinguishing them by gender, age, and physical appearance (Brink 52). This conveys the way Indigenous cultures have perceived non-humans as capable of possessing their own identities. Ken Zontek writes that the buffalo is an animal that "traditions of tribes historically identified with ... [and the] history of human-bison interaction extends back to time immemorial, to creation itself" (3). In our interview, artist Adrian Stimson elaborated on the particular significance of the buffalo in the Blackfoot tribe:

> The Bison plays a very important role in Blackfoot life, it is the foundation of our spiritual societies; the "Motokiks" Buffalo woman society is one of our most respected societies. The Blackfoot see the bison as not only a resource for food, clothing, shelter, tools and spiritual life, we see it as our kin, and it is in our DNA. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Tragically, Western colonizers over-hunted the buffalo both for profit and as a way to oppress the Plains Indigenous people.[3] As Stimson explains,

> The slaughter was a part of the colonial project, genocide, a carefully planned process of removing indigenous people from their lands. It was an evil act meant to destroy and erase the indigenous people who relied on them for food. It was meant to starve and ultimately kill the "Indian."
>
> It was an action so heinous and diabolical that resulted in the death of not only millions of bison, but also the death of the people who relied on them, the idea that every buffalo killed is an Indian gone was the policy of both Canadian and American governments. For my people the Blackfoot, it meant the end of a way of life and the real death of so many, many that were my family. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

The near extirpation of the buffalo by the early colonial settlers devastated the Plains Indigenous peoples' dependency on the animal, which was not only a source for survival, but also an important part of their traditions and identities. According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's three modes for relating to animals in their essay "Becoming Animal," the buffalo for the Plains Indigenous can be understood as an "Oedipal" animal because of its unique history and alliance with humans, which positions it as a symbolical representation of intimate family relations (240). In this kind of mode, the buffalo becomes highly "individualized and sentimentalized," thus elevating the animal's social status and importance. Does the historical trauma done to both the buffalo and First Nations people continue to have a lasting impact on current Indigenous generations, and if so, how is it expressed? Through an analysis of the representation of the buffalo in the artworks of Adrian Stimson and Dana Claxton we can begin to understand the trauma of colonialization for both human and non-human species, utilizing art as a tool for communication. This paper discusses how the artists portray the merging of Indigenous history and cultural identity with the image of the buffalo, which positions the animal as a culturally significant actor. I argue that by establishing the buffalo as a central figure that is at the core of Plains Indigenous identity, Stimson and Claxton reject a Western humanist ideology by intimately engaging with the non-human in their art. The representation and attitudes expressed towards the buffalo in the artworks of Stimson and Claxton therefore incorporates some ideals of posthumanist theory.[4] However, larger Niitsitapi[5] perspectives regarding animals also complicates and critiques posthumanist ideals, such as the liberal assumption in rights discourses that all rights should be extended to non-human

animals, which I will discuss further. Alternatively, I suggest that the artists illustrate a collaborative state of co-existence between humans and non-humans that challenges ideals of posthumanist theory, thus beginning to decolonize these ideals.

In his book *Posthumanism,* Pramod Nayar challenges the constructed social boundaries between humans and non-humans, exploring the blurring of bodily borders and identity between species that inspires the scope of this paper. A "critical posthumanism" approach, which Nayar defines as a rejection of human exceptionalism and abelism to include the non-human animal (4), therefore reflects the way in which the artists embrace the buffalo as part of their human identity. Posthumanist theorist Cary Wolfe uses the comparison of human prejudices as a framework for thinking about the oppressive treatment of non-humans, which the author suggests originates from humanist ideals (*Animal Rites* 192).[6] Where Wolfe views human rights discourses as a means for understanding anti-animal prejudices, this paper examines how the artists approach such issues through the merging of human and animal identities in art that reflects social and species conflicts simultaneously. Wolfe advocates for an ethical consideration of non-humans because of our shared characteristics (*What is Posthumanism?* 63), arguing that humans have a moral responsibility to non-human animals. I suggest that Stimson and Claxton uphold their moral responsibilities to the buffalo by promoting the animal as part of their Plains Indigenous identity and, moreover, as a valued kin, which advocates for the protection of the animal because of its distinct cultural and personal significance. In *The Cry of Nature*, Stephen Eisenman discusses the role art has played in the advocacy of animal rights, which also informs this paper. By situating the buffalo as a significant animal in their works, the artists emphasize the need to protect the animal and highlight the extensive conservation efforts of Indigenous animal activists, demonstrating how the conservation of an animal can lead to the conservation of human culture. This paper proposes that adopting an Indigenous perspective in which the animal is embraced as part of human identity — utilizing art as a space where such transformative experiences can be imagined — could offer new approaches for non-Indigenous attitudes towards animals. The visual representation of the merging of human and non-human identities can inspire cross-species way of thinking that push beyond the boundaries of conventional Western anthropocentrism to challenge not only species prejudices, but also lead to a re-evaluation of social prejudices between Indigenous and settler people. For non-Indigenous animal activists, the decolonizing of Western attitudes towards animals through an Indigenous perspective, which emphasizes a relationship of intimate kinship and interconnected co-existence between humans and non-humans, could

challenge colonial practices such as trophy hunting by drawing attention to the historical trauma associated with these practices.

Adrian Stimson: Being Buffalo. Adrian Stimson, a member of the Siksika Nation, is a multimedia artist who expresses themes of history and identity in his art ("Adrian Stimson"). The buffalo plays a pivotal role in Stimson's performance persona of Buffalo Boy, performed at the Burning Man Festival in 2007, and in the artist's solo exhibit, "Beyond Redemption," at the Mendel Art Gallery in 2010. In my exclusive interview with Stimson, I asked the artist why he chose to identify with the buffalo as opposed to other animals, such as the bear or wolf that also play important roles in Indigenous stories and traditions. Stimson answered,

> I felt that it [the buffalo] was a symbol of this history but was/is analogous to the indigenous population itself. Buffalo Boy is primarily a character parody of Buffalo Bill and his wild west shows, how the spirit of the Buffalo was a big part of that spectacle, how during those shows, the symbolic killing of bison reinforced the narratives and intent of manifest destiny and terra nullius, an empty land meant for the colonizers. Yet it was not an empty land, it had to be emptied first. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Stimson, Adrian. *Buffalo Boy*, performance. 2007. Burning Man, Black Rock Desert, NV. (©Adrian Stimson)

Buffalo Boy is a trickster character through which Stimson "expose(s) cultural and societal truths" (Rice and Taunton), shifting between a shaman-exterminator and a gay cowboy (Bell). In both personas, Stimson is clothed in a buffalo robe, corset, or undergarment. However, Buffalo Boy does not simply wear the buffalo, but rather crosses "species-borders" so that he is able to embody the animal by sharing its identity. In her article "Adrian Stimson: Buffalo Boy at Burning Man," Lynne Bell writes,

> In the Felliniesque campsite of Burning Man, the multi-gendered Buffalo Boy — neither human, beast, boy, nor girl — gives us access to the trans, to the crossing of boundaries, to metamorphosis and the hybrid. (44)

For instance, Stimson does not impersonate the buffalo by wearing a head-to-toe costume, which would fully conceal his human identity, but rather allows both human and animal identities to be visible simultaneously. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "Becoming is certainly not imitating or identifying with something…" (239). Instead, "becoming" occurs through the fluid process of contagion, which allows for a multiplicity of differences that transcend boundaries, including species boundaries (242). Stimson's fluidity between human and animal identities therefore represents the very nature of "becoming animal," but perhaps also exemplifies "becoming human," which is dependent on the presence of the animal.

In Stimson's film "What about the Red Man" (2006), "Buffalo Boy is portrayed running in every direction of a grand space where buffalo once roamed free" (Rice and Taunton). In the film, Stimson demonstrates a sense of "becoming one" with the buffalo. As Zontek notes, "This 'becoming of' the bison and their natural environment 'dissolved the borders of the inner and outer worlds' between humans and their surroundings"(8). Deleuze and Guattari suggest that becoming-animal involves an anti-hierarchical, rhizome model that is not "classificatory or genealogical" (239). The anti-hierarchical aspect of becoming-animal, which echoes posthumanist ideals (Nayar 4), allows for an equalizing effect between Stimson and the buffalo he becomes. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway also bases her theoretical framework around the notion of "becoming with" other species. Haraway argues that "response" is necessary in order to coexist with "companion species" and "an ongoing 'becoming with' to be a much richer web to inhabit any of the posthumanisms on display…" (16). Responding through artistic practice, Stimson portrays the buffalo as a "companion species" with which his human identity intertwines. Stimson presents a way in which human and non-human

identities can "become one" in an intimate bond of kinship — one in which both identities are equally represented through harmonious coexistence.

Although Stimson merges his human identity with the buffalo, demonstrating how a non-human informs the narrative of his Indigenous identity, the buffalo does not necessarily represent the larger scope of Indigenous attitudes towards many other kinds of non-humans. Kim TallBear critiques the field animal studies for only beginning to acknowledge Indigenous perspectives. TallBear writes,

> First of all, Indigenous peoples have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives. In addition, for many Indigenous peoples, their nonhuman others may not be understood in even critical Western frameworks as living. (234)

These "nonhuman others" that TallBear refers to include natural forces, such as stones and stars (234). Therefore, even progressive frameworks like posthumanist theory are challenged by how Indigenous human and non-human relationships are recognized and operate, thus raising the question of whether posthumanism can be indigenized. I would argue that a branch of posthumanist theory certainly could, one in which anti-anthropocentrism, anti-hierarchicalism, and the intertwining of multiple worlds and organisms is the focus. However, other branches of posthumanist theory, particularly those that address the liberal issues of animal rights, I would argue cannot be indigenized because of a differing, Western understanding of inter-species relations and classifications of "living" beings. However, a decolonization of the category of the animal is necessary in order to understand the unique relationship between Indigenous people and non-human animals and to begin a process of reconciliation. As TallBear writes:

> Our [Indigenous] traditional stories also portray nonhuman persons in ways that do not adhere to another meaningful modern category, the "animal." They feature relationships in which human and nonhuman persons, and nonhuman persons between themselves, harass and trick one another; save one another from injury or death; prey on, kill, and sometimes eat one another; or collaborate with one another. (235)

The notion of humans and non-human animals as "collaborating" with each other is an interesting concept, one that perhaps most accurately articulates the complex bond

between the Plains Indigenous people and the buffalo, as expressed in the works of Stimson and Claxton.

By connecting Buffalo Boy's human identity with the buffalo, Stimson positions the buffalo as a culturally significant animal. As a symbol of Indigenous identity, the buffalo is perceived a valuable animal in a cultural context and concern over the animal's wellbeing is raised. As Zontek writes, "Indians have demonstrated phenomenal cultural perseverance — spanning more than 125 years — in reinstating the bison once again as part of a sacred symbiosis" (152). While modern Indigenous lifestyles may depend less on the buffalo for survival, the buffalo continues to remain a significant aspect of Plains Indigenous identities and traditions, as demonstrated through Stimson's performance. I asked Stimson his thoughts on whether the buffalo population in North America has improved since their near extinction and whether he believes this improvement is due to the efforts of Indigenous activists who predominantly helped restore the buffalo population through cultural association. Would the results have been different if only non-Indigenous activists advocated for the buffalo species? Stimson replied,

> It is estimated that there are approximately 500,000 bison in North America now. [Today's bison are] a combination of wild herds and farmed bison. A far cry from the 75 million yet shows that they are resilient and can recover, if given the opportunity. I do believe that indigenous people themselves have restored the bison population, we have never severed our ties with them, and we want them back and through our spiritual people, activists, academics, artists and communities. We have always envisioned their comeback and dreamed for the day that they can roam freely among us.
>
> I feel that there are many non-indigenous allies who also see their value; many align their beliefs with that of indigenous people. Today there are many collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous people to save and promote the return of the bison. The scientific community has been very helpful in this regard. I believe that it has been joint effort primarily lead by indigenous people. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Furthermore, Valerius Geist writes, "The buffalo stands for a system of wildlife conservation in North America that is the most successful in the world" (14). By fighting for the conservation of the buffalo, Plains Indigenous people ensure that their own identities and cultures are restored. Yet, beyond the cultural impact that the return of the buffalo would have for the Plains Indigenous, it would more significantly symbolize an overcoming of colonial oppression that would enable a future that includes indigenized posthumanist ideals.

The buffalo is also the central theme in Stimson's multi-media exhibit, "Beyond Redemption," and is the protagonist in the installation *Beyond Redemption 3* and drawing *Bones 1*. In "Beyond Redemption," Stimson draws attention to the history of the buffalo in North America and as the artist comments, "reconnects to that history through art" (McKay). In response to my question of what inspired him to create the exhibition, Stimson replied,

> *Beyond Redemption* was the sum of my research around the historical slaughter of 75 million bison in North America. I was tying to sum up my feelings of this tragedy and the trauma it caused for my people, the Blackfoot, and all other Nations that depended on the Bison for food, shelter and spiritual life. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Following this question, I asked Stimson about the meaning of the exhibition's title: "Beyond Redemption." The *Oxford Dictionary* defines "redemption" as: "The action of saving or being saved from sin, error or evil" (Barber et al.), whereas the phrase "beyond redemption" is defined as: "(Of a person or thing) Too bad to be saved or improved" (Barber et al.). Whose relationship is beyond redemption: the First Nations and colonizers/settlers, the buffalo and the colonizers/settlers, or both? Stimson answered:

> I asked myself, could this action ever be redeemed? Can it be forgiven? Can the invaders/settlers be forgiven for this evil action? I say NO, it is Beyond Redemption.
>
> I believe the original slaughter itself is beyond redemption, there is no way that it can be redeemed. We can never forget these actions; they set the stage for the ongoing relationship between settler states and indigenous ways of being. I often wonder if the relationship can ever be repaired? Can decolonization ever become a reality? There is so much

> cognitive dissonance and racism that I doubt it. The damage that one action caused will be reverberated forever or until decolonization and individuals take responsibility for their histories and current actions. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

The "original slaughter" that Stimson refers to is in regards to both the human and nonhuman victims, thus again reiterating the historically intertwined identity of both subjects. What Stimson highlights in his response is that the colonial trauma experienced by the Plains Indigenous people and buffalo cannot be redeemed, but must be remembered — thus implying a call to action. For Stimson, the act of remembering is actualized through his art, which gives access to a shared history between Indigenous and settler people. I suggest that by reminding the spectator of the tragedies of colonial history and emphasizing the buffalo's cultural importance, Stimson is able to decolonize Western views by offering new perspectives on interspecies relations in his art. The action of decolonization that Stimson's art encourages the non-Indigenous spectator to engage with therefore leads to a better understanding of the collaborative relationship between the buffalo and Plains Indigenous people.

In the installation *Beyond Redemption 3*, a large stuffed buffalo is mounted on a red platform, encircled by ten buffalo-robed figures. The central buffalo in the middle of the work assumes the role of a teacher, distinguished by its size and authoritative stance, while the robed-figures resemble the roles of pupils.

Stimson, Adrian. *Beyond Redemption 3*, installation in "Beyond Redemption." 2010. Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon. (©Adrian Stimson)

When I asked Stimson about the sourcing of the buffalo hides, the artist replied:

> I use bison robes often in my work, when sourcing the robes, I look for individuals or companies that have ethical practices, who treat their animals well, most often they are farms that use natural methods of farming, who cull ethically, who use all the meat and as much of the bison as they can. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Additionally, Stimson shared his careful consideration of the taxidermy process for the buffalo robes, disclosing the deeply spiritual impact that the culling of the buffalo had on him. Stimson writes,

> The 10 robes around the taxidermy bison were naturally tanned as opposed to chemically tanned. Bison meat is becoming more mainstream and farming of bison more common, so robes are more readily available. For Beyond Redemption's taxidermy bison, I contacted a bison farm outside of Winnipeg, whose owner was a taxidermist. I talked to him about his farming ways and felt that he was both understanding of indigenous knowledge and had an overall ethical practice. From afar I did my spiritual practice of giving thanks to the bison for its life at the time of culling. I did the same with the 10 robes. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Stimson also remarked on the connection between the long-standing colonial history of game hunting and modern trophy hunting. Stimson suggests that the role of his taxidermy buffalo is one of an ironic reminder and way of connecting to the history of hunting. Stimson writes,

> Researching colonial history, game hunting plays a huge role, the number of taxidermy trophy heads hanging in many colonial houses can attest to this, this practice continues today by trophy hunters. By using the taxidermy bison and robes in my work, I hope to mirror back this practice, somewhat ironically. It plays with that history. And also references the historical slaughter. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Represented within the space of an Indigenous cultural context, the presence of the deceased buffalo in *Beyond Redemption 3* symbolizes the complex social and spiritual

contract that is respected between the hunter and the animal. As Calvin Martin explains,

> Hunting rests on a kind of social relationship between men and animals. Through the cycle of hunting rites men emphasize their respect by means of symbolic expression of their subordination to animals. (115)

Indigenous cosmology dictates that animals self-sacrifice, giving their lives willingly to the hunter in need, and that they are to be regarded as divine gifts (Martin 116). For the Niitsitapi, the activity of hunting holds spiritual and social significance and is therefore an activity that contributes to their cultural identity (Foster et al. 201). As Eisenman writes, for the Inuit "the hunt itself is seen not as a contest of wits but a communion between equals" (34). Zoe Todd's research explores the unique human and fish relationship of the Northern Indigenous in the community of Paulatuuq, noting their view of "fish pluralities," which is the "multiple ways of knowing and defining fish" (217). Todd writes, "Humans and fish, together, share complex and nuanced political and social landscapes that shape life in the community" (218). Todd also discusses the various states in which fish exist, not only in the physical form of food, but also as symbols in stories (222), thus demonstrating the multiplicity of ways Indigenous people perceive and interact with animals. Furthermore, Todd writes that fish are regarded as capable of agency, and thus "human-fish relationships in Paulatuuq are characterized by a relational, pragmatic approach at various 'active sites of engagement'" (225). The capacity for animal agency creates a sense of equality between the hunter and the prey, which elevates the social status of the animal. The activity of hunting from an Indigenous perspective is therefore one between two conscious and agent beings, which challenges power constructs of species hierarchies. Furthermore, hunting emphasizes the dependency between the hunter and the prey, both of which rely on each other to collaboratively co-exist. The hunt can therefore be perceived as an 'active site of engagement' where interspecies responses occur to determine results, which exemplifies critical posthumanism. As Nayar writes,

> Critical posthumanism thus favours co-evolution, symbiosis, feedback and responses as determining conditions rather than autonomy, competition and self-contained isolation of the human. (9)

While the aspect of hunting is difficult to accept for a non-Indigenous animal rights activist, it offers an alternative approach to thinking about co-existence between species

in comparison, for instance, to the exploitation of animals for entertainment purposes in the "sport" of hunting in Western cultures. In her article "Decolonizing the Non/Human," Jinthana Haritaworn discusses the necessity to decolonize the construct of a colonial environmental landscape, in which human actors are expected to play a "protectionist narrative" (211). In this colonial landscape, Haritaworn writes that Indigenous people are often profiled for their pathologized interaction with nature (211). Haritaworn addresses the ironic outcome of this environmental racism:

> The need to go beyond a simple analytic of anthropocentrism is highlighted by the fact that Indigenous peoples have had to fight to stay on and live off their lands, to continue to hunt and fish, for example, against both developers and environmentalists. (211)

An Indigenous approach to hunting can therefore be perceived as a paradoxical decolonization of the colonial environmental, challenging the colonial implications associated with posthumanist ideals against hunting.

The use of the buffalo carcasses in the installation *Beyond Redemption 3* may seem counter-productive to contemporary animal rights advocacy; however, within the installation it serves as a reminder of the spiritual and cultural importance of the buffalo for the Plains Indigenous ways of life. As Stimson comments in "Canadian Art" magazine:

> I use the bison as a symbol representing the destruction of the Aboriginal way of life, but it also represents survival and cultural regeneration. The bison is central to Blackfoot being. And the bison as both icon and food source, as well as the whole history of its disappearance, is very much a part of my contemporary life. (qtd. in Bell 48)

The buffalo's carcass within the gallery space becomes a sacred object: "The corpse of the animal begins to be treated less as a person, and more like a sacred substance" (Martin 116). Therefore, Stimson is able to illustrate the Indigenous spiritual connection held with the buffalo, which contributes to the cultural significance of the animal. The central mounted buffalo that stands authoritatively above the disfigured robed figures emphasizes the animal's value and the respect it is given within the Plains Indigenous culture. Acknowledging the buffalo as a sacred being, Stimson further raises awareness and advocates for the protection of the animal by situating it as an important aspect of his spiritual human identity. Furthermore, the shapeless buffalo-robed figures

positioned around the mounted buffalo indicate fluidity between Indigenous and buffalo identities. To elaborate, the robed figures are neither in the shape of humans nor of buffalo, suggesting them to be either or both. Nayar writes that an aspect of posthumanist theory is a moral-ethical response that blurs species boundaries (8). By obscuring the identity of the robed figures, as that of either human or animal, Stimson exemplifies the ideals of a late modern "posthumanism" that was an Indigenous practice, thus demonstrating a return to a previous awareness of human and animal relations that is decolonized.

Empathy is at the heart of animal rights discourses, which prompted me to ask Stimson whether he feels empathy for the Buffalo population that was massacred by the colonizers? And if so, how is this kind of empathy different from a ritualized killing of the animal by the Plains Indigenous people? Stimson replied,

> Absolutely, I often say what happened to the buffalo happened to us. We have and had a relationship with the bison for centuries, they were a part of our diet and I believe that through those centuries, their DNA mingled with ours, they are in us and therefore connected in a very special way. There was a great respect for the bison, they were everything to us, and thus there is a difference between killing to kill off a species and a people to open up the plains and killing to survive. There are many protocols when we hunted the bison and every part of the bison was used, they were never left to rot in whole on the plains. The respect is mirrored in the societies we created; we mimic them, and also sacrifice ourselves through ceremonial acts for them. We never took more than necessary and were a part of their constant renewal. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo)

This is not to say, however, that Stimson did not ethically consider the use of the buffalo carcass in his installation. In a newspaper article from the Saskatoon StarPheonix, Stimson states, "I used to support PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] and all that … but for me, given the history of the bison, I feel strongly about using the bison in my work" (McKay). Stimson's rejection of PETA's ethical standards — which would include a stance against the hunting, eating, and use of the animal — roots the artist's position, in regards to the use of the buffalo, within the framework of Indigenous ideals as opposed to Western (and Eastern, since religions such as Jainism advocate against harming any living being) views. Stimson writes,

> At the time I decided to make this work, I was very conflicted yet in the end I decided that I felt the work would best express my sorrow for the historical slaughter and in turn, hopefully bring that horror and understanding to viewers. I knew it would be controversial, a trigger for many. In the end, as a Blackfoot person, the use of bison material culture is part of who I am; I cannot turn my back on that. I strongly desire to keep the bison in my life, to consume its meat, to use its fur, to integrate its spirit into my spirit, to become the bison, to promote its presence on the land, to encourage their growth, to protect them, to encourage ethical management and finally, to ensure that they will be around for many generations. They are part of the continuum of being Blackfoot and thus are part of my decolonization; they continue to feed me like they fed my ancestors. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Constructing the representation of the buffalo within a cultural context allows Stimson to advocate for the buffalo's significance by connecting it with Indigenous cultural identity. However, the conflicting views between the evolving field of animal rights that is largely influenced by Western perspectives and Indigenous approaches to animals led me to ask Stimson his views on the issue of killing animals. For instance, one of the arguments in animal rights discourses is that animals desire and deserve to live – to kill them is "speciesist" and ethically wrong.[7] Although Indigenous values believe in responding to animals in a respectful manner, grateful for the animal's sacrifice if hunted, in comparison to ethical atrocities found in situations such as factory farming, the end result is still the killing of the animal. Is there a potential for non-Indigenous animal rights views and Indigenous views to find mutual agreement and establish a different approach towards animals and traditions? Or will boundaries, such as different tradition and perceptions, keep the viewpoints of both groups separated? Stimson answered:

> Animal rights activists have to decolonize themselves first … they hide behind their ethics and ignore America's history of genocide and ongoing subjugation. They ignore the facts around farming, [such as] the number of small animals killed in the process … it's cherry picking who they want to single out as being wrong, and quite frankly racist, the Inuit seal hunt comes to mind and the threats levied against them, I find their argument very hypocritical.

> Indigenous people were a part of the environment and did play a role in the management and well being of the bison. As long as animal rights activists act as the judge and jury of what is right and what is wrong for indigenous people, there will never be a meeting of the minds. In a weird way, they continue the colonial project, telling us that our ways are wrong. Now having said that, I often feel conflicted as a meat eater, I hate factory farming; I see the environmental degradation that meat production causes. I do feel for animals and have cut down my own meat consumption and have moved to a more vegetarian diet. I support ethical farming and humane treatment of animals. I am conflicted when wild bison herds whose numbers are small can be culled by local indigenous bands (as in the herd at Prince Albert), I worry it will affect their numbers. Yet in the end I will continue to stand up for those tribes, it is their way of life and is a continuum of their traditional practices. As time advances, there may be a time when traditions change, scarcity will dictate this, and in the process we will all have to change our minds on what we eat and think of animal welfare. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

For Stimson, the issue of "decolonization" is necessary before settler and Indigenous ideologies can settle on an agreement. I suggest that Stimson's artworks enable non-Indigenous spectators to confront their own roles in the "colonization" of ethical and species boundaries, allowing individuals to learn about alternative Indigenous viewpoints by using the buffalo as a mediator for social issues. The buffalo can serve as a kind of mediator because the animal exists in a space where a common concern and empathy or compassion can be expressed for the welfare of the animal by both Indigenous and settler groups, despite differing attitudes or beliefs.

In *Bones 1,* another of Stimson's works in the "Beyond Redemption" exhibition, the overkilling of the buffalo by the colonizers is portrayed. *Bones 1* emphasizes the tragic results of the buffalo massacre, represented through the image of a massive pile of bones that comprises the majority of the space in the composition. Other than the clear depiction of only a few pronounced buffalo skulls, the pile of bones can be interpreted as either human or animal given their abstract forms. The title of the work is also vague, allowing for the term "bones" to refer to both the human or animal. Therefore, the boundary of identity between human and animal is blurred and the work can also be interpreted as representing the massacre of First Nations people. Amid the large heap of bones, two early twentieth-century dressed colonial figures (judging by the top hats and

tailored frockcoats) are also present, one positioned on top of the pile of bones and the other below. The drawing also depicts the ghostly white silhouette of a child with their arms outstretched, placed directly in front of the colonial figure at the top of the bone pile. The placement of the colonial figure on top of the pile conveys colonial oppression literally over the buffalo and the Indigenous people. The colonial figure at the bottom of the pile further signifies colonial control and oppression by situating the human-animal remains in between both colonial figures, which implies that there is no escape from either above or below. Furthermore, the faceless child silhouette may be interpreted as a representation of the colonizer's attempt to wipe away Indigenous identity through the genocide of both First Nations people and buffalo.

Stimson, Adrian. *Bones 1*, oil/graphite on canvas. 2010. Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon. (©Adrian Stimson)

While *Bones 1* is positioned within a historical context, the representation of the buffalo can also be applied to contemporary understandings of Indigenous identity. *Bones 1* emphasizes the unresolved trauma of colonial oppression of both the buffalo population and First Nations people. The illustration explains the purpose behind Indigenous activists who fought to restore the buffalo population, justifying their

actions as a way to recover and reconcile traumatized Indigenous and buffalo relations. As Zontek notes, "Native Americans have sought to preserve the bison as an extension of preserving themselves and their culture" (xiii). The efforts of Indigenous activists have been to restore the harmonious relationship between Indigenous people and the buffalo, which metaphorically can be understood as an effort that restores the child-like silhouette with a face — an identity.

Dana Claxton: Buffalo Misappropriation. Dana Claxton is a multi-media artist and a member of the Hunkpapa Lakota Nation. Claxton's work "investigates the ongoing impact of colonialism on Aboriginal cultures in North America through the mediums of film and photography" ("Dana Claxton"). The buffalo is a featured subject in Claxton's video and mixed media installation, *Buffalo Bone China*, curated by Tania Willard at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in 1997.

In Claxton's performance, which accompanies the installation, the artist attempts to reconcile with the notion of trauma and fragmentation (of memories and history, I interpret) in an effort to restore both buffalo and Indigenous identities. Willard describes the performance as:

> Dana smashes pieces of china and makes four bundles and places them in a sanctified circle while an experimental video of buffalo plays. Feeling the loss of the buffalo, the backbone of Plains spirituality and sustenance, the artist uses a rubber mallet to destroy plates and bowls. ("Dana Claxton: Buffalo Bone China")

The installation comments on the British colonial exploitation of buffalo bones for the making of fine china in England, highlighting the devastating effects this had on the First Nations people ("Dana Claxton: Buffalo Bone China").[8] One of these effects was the misappropriation of the buffalo that resulted in the loss of culture and identity. The representation of the buffalo as a heap of bones resembles the image of the massacred buffalos in Stimson's drawing, *Bones 1*, and both artworks suggesting the identity of the buffalo is fragmented and traumatized. By associating the buffalo with the identity of the First Nations people, Indigenous identity is by extension also represented as fragmented and traumatized. Furthermore, the commodification of the buffalo bones represents the body as an assemblage of raw materials, which is fetishized in art.

Claxton, Dana. *Buffalo Bone China*, multimedia installation. 1997. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. (©MacKenzie Art Gallery)

In Claxton's performance, the china symbolizes the colonial failure to recognize the unique relationship between the buffalo and Plains Indigenous. Claxton's act of smashing the china demonstrates a resistance against the commodification of the buffalo and in doing so, Claxton engages in a symbolic restorative action against colonial trauma. By destroying the china — a misappropriated product made from the buffalo bones — Claxton restores a sense of justice by freeing the buffalo from its materialistic state of colonial oppression. The smashing of the china demonstrates a form of animal advocacy because Claxton challenges the Western commodification of the buffalo. In other words, the fine china that is made from buffalo bones represents a colonialized luxury good, which in comparison with how the Plains Indigenous utilized the buffalo for many other kinds of practical uses illustrates the misuse of the animal. As Zontek writes, "Native people utilized more than one hundred parts of the bison, including the guts as containers, the dung for fuel, the bones for tools…"(9). The decorative fine china that Western settlers misappropriated the buffalo bones for was thus a non-necessity and an unnecessary exploitation of the animal. The Western

commodification of the buffalo also represents a lack of intimate coexistence with the animal, especially in contrast with Indigenous hunter-prey relationships. The china therefore symbolizes a further form of disrespect towards Indigenous ways of life and identity.

In Stimson's *Beyond Redemption 3* installation, for instance, the buffalo is positioned in a stance of reverence and respect, placed above the other robed figures. While the hides of the buffalo are used as artistic commodities, they are represented within a cultural context that exempts them from being understood as "luxury goods." The buffalo is thus represented as an expression of Indigenous identity and maintains its living resemblance, while the fine china completely alters the buffalo into a commodity that has no resemblance to the actual shape of the animal. Therefore, although Stimson objectifies the buffalo in his art, the artist ensures that the integrity of the animal is upheld by maintaining its living resemblance, exemplifying a sense of respect for the buffalo. In "Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships," Robert Brightman explains,

> Animals may "pity" the hunters who have need of their flesh, and especially is their benevolence evoked when the hunter complies with the conventional objectifications of "respect," treating the carcass, meat, and bones in the correct fashion. (187)

Haraway also focuses on the notion of respect when it comes to relationships with non-humans, stating: "Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect" (19). By advocating for the respectful treatment of the buffalo, Claxton incorporates Haraway's notion of respect as a form of response to the animal, further illustrating the respectful coexistence between Indigenous people and non-humans. By smashing the china, Claxton not only advocates for the respectful treatment of the buffalo, but also demands it for the First Nations people as well!

Conclusion. The buffalo — driven nearly to extinction by colonial settlers by the end of the nineteenth-century — is at the heart of Northern Plains Indigenous identity. Contemporary Canadian artists Adrian Stimson and Dana Claxton feature the buffalo in their works, demonstrating the animal's significance both historically and within contemporary contexts by establishing the buffalo as an important part of Indigenous identity. By emphasizing the cultural significance of the buffalo in their art, the artists

draw attention and inform the public about the restorative efforts of Indigenous activists, further promoting the necessity to conserve the buffalo and Indigenous culture.

In Stimson's performance persona, Buffalo Boy, the artist intertwines human and animal identities by wearing a buffalo costume. By associating the buffalo with Indigenous identity, Stimson raises awareness about the cultural significance of the buffalo, which in turn advocates for the protection of the animal because of its importance. In Stimson's "Beyond Redemption" exhibit, the buffalo is also a central figure in both the *Beyond Redemption 3* installation and *Bones 1* drawing. In *Beyond Redemption 3*, spiritual aspects and a collaborative relationship with the buffalo are emphasized. In *Bones 1*, the artwork exposes the historical trauma of colonial exploitation. By representing the buffalo as a culturally and historically significant animal, Stimson establishes the animal as a critical symbol of Indigenous identity, thus justifying a continuation of conservation efforts. I asked Stimson what does the buffalo symbolize or what role does it play in the lives of current First Nations generations? How has the role of the buffalo changed from the way their ancestors perceived and relied on the animal? Stimson answered:

> It [the buffalo] is a symbol of resilience and hope. The bison continues to inspire and give strength to many. It continues to play a strong spiritual role in many FN ceremonies and spiritual practices. As they grow and are reintroduces to natural areas and parks, it gives hope that our ways of being will continue. The white buffalo is part of many tribal prophecies, and many white bison have been born in the past number of years. Its role has not changed; the bison still has many lessons in store for us and will continue to give us strength and hope for the future. Today there are more conservational efforts and sharing of indigenous knowledge of the bison for foster better relationships between peoples. As some say education is the new buffalo. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

In Dana Claxton's installation and performance, *Buffalo Bone China*, the artist comments on the colonial exploitation of the buffalo as well, and by extension, the oppression and genocide of the First Nation people. When Claxton performs the smashing of the fine china that is a misappropriated commodity made from buffalo bones, Claxton demonstrates a resistance of colonial oppression for both the buffalo and Indigenous people. By portraying the buffalo as a culturally significant part of Indigenous identity, Claxton also advocates for the buffalo's protection and emphasis the importance of

restorative efforts for the buffalo population. As Zontek asserts, "This restoration – marked by a vision for a healthy landscape, empathy between the animal and human worlds, and cultural perseverance – warrants presentation" (1).

Through the display of animal advocacy in the works of Adrian Stimson and Dana Claxton, the artists are able to re-establish and reclaim their sense of Indigenous identity. While neither artist necessarily argues for the buffalo's animal rights directly, they advocate for a more harmonious and collaborative relationship with animals, reminding outside spectators of the vital and complex role animals play in other cultural contexts. In *The Cry of Nature*, Eisenman analyzes inter-species relations in Indigenous art, observing the Inuit hunter-gatherer relationship with animals as one of respect and autonomy (34) — aspects that I argue are also at the core of Stimson and Claxton's art in regards to the relationship between the buffalo and Plains Indigenous tribes. However, while the buffalo is understood as an autonomous figure with its own identity and elevated status, it also informs the cultural identity of the Indigenous people. In other words, within an Indigenous cultural framework that rejects Western humanist traditions, the buffalo is regarded as a spiritual, sentient, and near-equal being, not subject to the same speciesist prejudices it would face in Western cultures. Non-Indigenous animal rights activists have the challenge of approaching thousands of years of Indigenous ways of knowing and practices. In order to begin a reconciliation of the traumatized human and animal worlds, as well as Indigenous and settler relationships, non-Indigenous activists must become aware of the colonial implications of some posthumanist ideals. As Finn Lynge writes, "A world of beauty, life and respect for every living thing has no better allies than the Indigenous hunters and fishermen who live on their ancestors' land" (8). Boyd also suggests, "A move towards the hunter-gatherer relationship with animals would both bring humanity closer to the scientific reality and bring a more sustainable relationship with animal species in general." Understanding human and animal relations through an Indigenous perspective, where the identities of various species are presented as interconnected and equally important, can offer non-Indigenous animal rights activists new advocating methods, such as presenting inter-species relations as integral aspects of other cultural identities and practices. Furthermore, the artists demonstrate how art can be used as a tool in the communication of alternative perspectives. As Stimson comments,

> Art will always be an effective tool in understanding our human and animal condition. I believe the bison spirit lives in me, I can be a voice for

> them, I can show the world how we lived and continue to live with them. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

My final question to Stimson was this: Can the concern raised over the buffalo help reconnect First Nations people with settler generations and build new relationships? In other words, can co-activism between Indigenous and non-Indigenous animal activists lead to a form of reconciliation, in which the buffalo serves as shared interest or as a mediator of sorts? Stimson replied:

> Yes, we first have to remember and understand our history, to educate new and past generations on what happened, understand the devastation that the slaughter caused and how that still reverberates today. New relationships have been formed between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples and are evolving. The buffalo can be a symbol of conciliation, yet the majority of the work has to take place in the minds and hearts of the settler, indigenous people have been doing the majority of the work in understanding and healing this history. I see glimmers of hope within settler communities, minds and hearts are changing, albeit slowly. ("Beyond Redemption and the Buffalo")

Promoting Niitsitapi views of animals through art enables the artists to portray issues of colonial trauma and history in a medium that everyone understand. Claxton and Stimson advocate for a collaborative coexistence among species in their works and suggest new ways of thinking about human and non-human relationships through art. Claxton and Stimson's works exemplify a site where alternative social views can be represented and where the trauma of our shared colonial history can be addressed. Furthermore, the artists promote a sense of inclusivity for the non-human to be embraced as part human cultural identity, incorporating but also critiquing posthumanist ideals, which advocates for more conversational efforts for the animal. I conclude that art is a meaningful tool that can facilitate a deconstruction of species borders and promote animal rights by positioning an animal within a cultural construct, while also offering an engaging way to promote posthumanist ideals.

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Notes

1.The Oxford dictionary defines the term "buffalo" as: "1. The N American bison"; see Barber et al. 99. Although I will use the term "bison" occasionally within this paper, I will use the term "buffalo" more frequently because of its more common usage.

2. For a concise overview of the buffalo's cultural and biological evolution in Alberta, see the chapter "Bison in Alberta: Paleontology, Evolution, and Relations with Humans" in Foster et al.

3. For more on buffalo hunting, see Branch; Taylor; and Zontek.

4. Nayar defines "critical posthumanism" as: "Critical posthumanism rejects the 'ableism' of traditional humanism to include variant bodies — such as the differently abled — as well as the animal. By focusing less on ability and agency and emphasizing shared vulnerability, posthumanism calls for a radical rethink of species uniqueness and boundedness of the human" (4). For more on posthumanist theory, also see Wolfe's *Posthumanism*.

5. The Blackfoot word for all Native nations.

6. For an insightful paper that criticizes Wolfe's aesthetic biases, see Sherbert.

7. For more on modern animal rights discourses, see Regan; Singer.

8. Buffalo hides were also exported to Germany, where they were made into leather; see Taylor 10.

9. For more on the commodification of buffalo bones and the "bone business" in the Canadian prairies, see Geist 110-11.

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