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There is Buffalo Ecocide: A Meditation upon Homecoming in Buffalo Country

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I. Returning Home to Buffalo Country

Figure One: Historical Marker on US Route 2. Photograph by James Hatley

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'The Plains were and are a covenant between humans and bison'. Vine Deloria, Jr.

'Let them kill, skin and sell until the buffalo is exterminated'. Gen Philip Sheridan

The black line of asphalt that is U.S Route 2 slices straight ahead through grasslands in the northernmost reaches of Montana, broad expanses of the earth that just over ten thousand years ago were under thousands of feet of ice. Currently fenced in by barbed-wire and speckled with cattle, the land here, groomed by the former weight of that ice, stretches out flat and for the most part treeless in all directions and, at least for the time being, is green, as far as the eye can see. Above the fields, in what passes for a rainy season in arid climes, great reefs of clouds, blue in the distance, roam the skies, shiny thunderheads rising upward with, here and there, dark splotches of precipitation lying below. The dome of the heavens, one learns in this place, is big enough to be haunted by storms and yet remain luminous with sun. This is particularly so in the last, long days of spring approaching summer solstice.

After a week on the road, I and my ultra-lite travel trailer will be settling in by this evening to spend several days in Buffalo Camp on the recently-established American Prairie Reserve. Although the Great Falls of the Missouri River marking the site of my own childhood are fully a hundred miles to the west, the matching expanses of sky and earth surrounding me at this moment announce that I am home. In just about any circumstance, the recognition of homecoming juxtaposes the familiar with the uncanny, the intimate with the unknown. This proves to be the case here too, as I find myself marooned, however magnificently, in a landscape that is disconcertingly apt at revealing the immensity of the earth, its unwieldly, planetary scale. As on oceans, the slow curving of the globe is palpable and insistent here, the dramatic and singular topographical feature by which all else is in turn defined, humans included. Gazing into the reaches unfolding before me, I experience yet again a feeling long associated with this place, as if the top of my skull were being forcibly wrenched off, so that sky might pour in unfettered onto now-exposed gray matter. The car lopes into openness that will not quit, the droning rhythms of its passage replacing for hours on end any sense that one's destination will ever be reached. Nothing intervenes to break this spell as the distances impose themselves, unless one stops one's car, gets out and drops down on one's knees to find an anthill or a stone in which to bury one's gaze. As Richard Manning observes, 'in a place so vast, the mind can only survive by compressing it to the intimate'.[1] This is, I remind myself, not an easy place to be human. The scale is all wrong.

But of course, that the scale is so bewildering is precisely what tells me this is home. Returning here has been in my sixty-ninth year a chance to renew acquaintance with a place that instructs one in one's humanity precisely by intimidating it. I left here for graduate studies on the east coast several decades ago, partly with the notion in mind of finally planting a garden there in a place where one might locate dependably-moist earth, a sunny and intimate plot of carrots and eggplant, okra and tomatoes, its borders drenched all around in the green shade of neighboring deciduous trees. Bluebirds and cardinals, blue jays and chickadees would be in attendance. I was hoping then for something more friendly, more temperate, less frigid, less dry, certainly less windy and exposed, and more distinctly arboreal. One might even have accused me of having been in search of a facsimile of the Garden of Eden. More or less, I was, and had perhaps even at times found it, but this had not kept me from dreaming of another earth altogether.

And so half-drugged at the moment by the monotony of ceaselessly spinning tires, I notice the words 'Buffalo Country' spelled out in white caps on a large wooden sign and speed by before the thought of what I have just read catches up to me. Turning around—not another

car in sight—I retrace my route to the sign, a historical marker, pull off the road, and stop to consider its message. Simply the name is already a provocation, for if one looks in any direction not a single buffalo is to be seen among the multitude of cattle scattered across the landscape. The opening sentence illuminates this matter further: 'The Great Plains of eastern Montana was home to thousands of buffalo, before Euro-American hunters nearly wiped them out in the early 1880s'.

II. Telling the Buffalo Gone

Making Buffalo homeless was not an easy matter. The rural calm of the scene in which I find myself, hair tousled by wind alive with the scent of grass, is belied by the violence with which this world I have called and would call again home has come about. I have returned here at precisely this moment to ask the question of how those who count themselves as the inheritors of settlement, those, like myself, who have grown up in this landscape, loving it fiercely, might come to terms with the conditions by which it was acquired purportedly as one's own. Particularly pressing for me is the manner in which, in a time of accelerated anthropogenic extinction of a wide range of living kinds, I find myself called upon to acknowledge how an iconic species, Bison bisoni, was nearly lost to the earth. That this occurred for the sake of Euro-American settlement, which is to say, for the sake of my own possibility to have been born and walked upon the face of the earth here, is something I cannot let go of. That this living kind is now making a comeback is perhaps a heartening story, given the precariousness of the continued existence of so many other species across the face of the earth, particularly among those routinely characterized as charismatic mega-fauna. Once reduced to a scattering of around a thousand remnant animals teetering on extinction, buffalo now number around 500,000, of which about 30,000 are to be found in conservation herds. Only 5,000 of these in turn are free-roaming.[2] The majority of surviving buffalo then are maintained in semi-domesticated production herds for supplying meat to consumers.

Indeed, the buffalo is so treasured these days that it has been recently named as the official mammal of the United States, joining the eagle in the national pantheon of our first animals.[3] But as heartening as the prospect of Buffalo resurgence might be, its very occurrence continues to be framed by a regime of settlement that is still not at ease with Buffalo's continued existence in these environs and is deeply resistant to its bettered fortunes. The violence that was Buffalo Genocide is not done with its work, although it no longer is so bold as to wield rifle and skinning knife in the carrying out of its project. For example, one might well erect another sign on US Route 87 a hundred miles to the south of this one, in which the passerby is invited to look out on a landscape in which not only are Buffalo absent but legal means have been taken to ensure the perpetuity of this situation. Here too the Buffalo prove to be not at home. Tired of 'preservation schemes that keep cropping up',[4] Cleo Boyce, a rancher living near Winifred, Montana, has led a movement in which 133 property owners in northern Fergus County have initiated a 'negative easement' to keep bison permanently off their former homelands on the short grass prairie. The area covered by this action consists of more than 200,000 acres. 'Cows and bison just don't mix', argues Ron Poertner, another rancher in the Winifred area. 'The easement goes beyond just talking; it puts meat on the bone and represents a legally binding means to put bison off limits'.[5]

Given the continued circumstances then of Buffalo extirpation, the nonchalance of a historical marker's opening words, in which so much is implied and yet so little is made explicit, is striking: 'The Great Plains of eastern Montana was home to thousands of buffalo, before Euro-American hunters nearly wiped them out in the early 1880s'. In what tone is

one to hear the voice of the one who speaks this sentence? Its affect is curiously garbled. Is it worried? Helpfully informative? Beleaguered? Does the voice mourn? One detects a hint of shame in the acknowledgment of the attempt to wipe out a living kind from its home ground, even as this is deflected by pinning the deed on 'Euro-American hunters', a vague category that points in a direction without being too specific about whom exactly among the living or the dead, if anyone in particular at all, should be included. The sentences that follow are in turn formulated to evoke the way of life engaged in by First Peoples who are characterized here as once having been at home with Buffalo on the short grass prairie. This occurs without mention of where these peoples are now to be found and whether they have any views currently about what occurred then. One reads of the 'dog days', of how 'pishkuns' were employed in hunting, of how ten pounds of meat, once dried, became a pound of pemican, of how tribal rivalries flared at times in jockeying for access to a valued food source. As the hodgepodge of cultural terms and historical details pile up, one has the impression of having been invited to read an entry not unlike that found in an encyclopedia. In doing so, one finds, just as when one reads an entry from an encyclopedia, that one has been encouraged to pursue further one's curiosity about what there is to know about Buffalo Country, even as one is given leave to congratulate oneself for having been edified by what one has already come to know about it.

This sign telling of Buffalo Country functions then as a form of civic liturgy, in which the passerby is invited to reflect upon how where one now stands leaves one beholding to higher truths, to realities, even if they are merely secular and historical, that demand one's attention and implicitly call for one's allegiance. As a result, one is invited into not only the telling but also the living out of a story that brings one into consonance with how this particular place in which one finds oneself upon the face of the earth matters and how it invites those who dwell in or visit it to understand the meaning of that dwelling or visitation. In this way, the sign fulfills the warrant suggested by the etymology of the word liturgy, which stems from *leitos ergos*, the 'people's work'.[6] In the original practice of liturgy within ancient Greek society, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has argued, was the notion that one's words and actions were in the first place to be offered for the sake of a higher purpose or responsibility, one in which how one is called to live among others takes precedence over one's own claims upon those others.[7] In this way, one's labors (*travails*) are revealed to have become works (*oeuvres*) that sustain and even elevate a world that is not merely for oneself but also persistently for the sake of others.[8] In liturgy, not only one's words but also one's actions are revealed as already in communication with others before one might have made sense of them as merely being offered for the sake of oneself. In liturgy one is called upon not only to know about others but also to be in acknowledgment of them; one is called upon to offer oneself as a witness for their sake.

The historical marker naming Buffalo Country then is hardly trivial. For, if it is to be true to its liturgical vocation, it struggles with nothing less than witnessing how the bringing to mind of Buffalo might sustain, to say nothing of elevating, the world in which the reader now finds her or himself. Complicating this tribute is the fact of Buffalo Genocide, that the very process of settlement which has come to recognize these homelands as Buffalo's, precluded the continued existence of Buffalo in them. One might praise the State of Montana for having at least raised the issue here, but the manner in which it is carried out remains, at least in this particular instance, deeply troubling: through this sign and the liturgy whose performance it invites, darker purposes, however confusedly and surreptitiously, still remain at work.

One way to get at the unease in which this sign might leave its onlooker is to consider how it functions as what Deborah Bird Rose, borrowing a term from the thought of Mikhail

Bakhtin, has characterized as a chronotope, which is to say, 'a place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied, and where time is bound into space'.[9] Acting as chronotope, the sign sets out the conditions by which time is called upon to show up in the scene before which one stands. This is accomplished discursively in this particular instance by the manner in which the sign's narrative sinks the story of a homeland unremittingly into its past tense. And so, one reads of the wiping out of a living kind and the ecosystem that it was nurtured by, as if *once upon a time* it had happened. Buffalo were *once upon a time* here, the sign reports, and they were *once upon a time* nearly wiped out by some, those who were Euro-American hunters, even as Buffalo were *once upon a time* treasured by others, those who were native peoples. In constructing the story of this place in this way, the sign invites those who read it to imagine another world that no longer exists, a world that has disappeared, a world that has ceased to be a world, indeed a world that no longer can be counted as counting as a world here and now.

Through this sign, then, one is learning to name a place after its ghosts. One proclaims: 'This *is* Buffalo Country', only to add immediately that regretfully the Buffalo in question have been more or less erased from the scene and that this erasure is itself precisely the manner in which Buffalo continue to be meaningful here and now, in so far as they are to be meaningful at all. To return then to these lands, to Buffalo Country, is to return to a place that is twisted up in its past tense. That this is so when one returns to one's home is not so unusual. Indeed, the very thing that makes homecoming so uncanny inevitably are the ghosts—one's departed parents, former teachers, childhood friends, and an assortment of beloved pets still whispering (or neighing, barking, meowing, bellowing, or tweeting) in one's ear as one walks about the streets and over the fields of a world that persists, even as it is no more. In homecoming, time itself both establishes and intimidates one in one's humanity, as one is revealed not only to be an individual who is mortal but also to have been embedded in a world whose citizens, both human and more than human, inevitably and in their entirety pass away. But, and here's the grace, that very loss makes possible in turn a renewal of the earth, as passing away becomes the passing down of one's works, the fruits of one's life, to succeeding generations. In the loss witnessed by one's homecoming, one learns to smile upon a past that has delivered one to oneself, even as the present delivers oneself to others yet to come.

But the manner in which Buffalo Country is twisted up in its past tense defies this rather benign even if spectral account of homecoming. For the loss, the passing away, that is named here involves something quite different than the issue of one's own or one's neighbor's mortality, or of, for that matter, the way in which the reaches of the earth overwhelm one's all too human grasp of one's surroundings every time one steps out one's door. What is named instead is the very erasure of home altogether, an action that has been in turn engineered and then artfully molded into the shape of settlement culture by one's own forebears, particularly if one counts oneself among those who now claim to find themselves at home in Montana's settlement culture. In such a place, the invitation to smile upon the past that has delivered one to oneself is permeated with an unease that cannot be assuaged. For in the very attempt of that smile one finds oneself confronting a time in which one is not only implicated in occupying homeland stolen from others but also in having insisted that one was to be congratulated for having done so. Further the very conditions of this theft required the wholesale evaporation of a dominant living kind, who, even if it turns out has not been wholly 'wiped out' in the process, now finds itself no longer invited to be at home in a vast swath of its former habitat. Indeed, that very habitat, the short grass prairie, has itself disappeared. In the regime of settlement, Buffalo Country then is to be precisely identified as the place where not only Buffalo are no longer at home but also the very habitat by which they thrived has ceased

to offer itself for homecoming. The attack on Buffalo as a living kind, which is to say, Buffalo Genocide, proves to be inextricably intertwined with an attack on an entire ecosystem, which is to say, Buffalo Ecocide.[10]

III. The Sieving and Shaming of Buffalo Country

Deborah Bird Rose remarks on how in the Australian context settlement stories act chronotopically as sieves that strain out the remembrance of those who have been displaced and 'hold only narratives of comfortable triumph' for those who now claim to find themselves at home.[11] In the sign discussed above naming Buffalo Country, the beginning of the contestation of such a mode of storytelling is in evidence as the reality of Buffalo Ecocide is at least explicitly referred to, along with modes of remembering those peoples who were formerly at home among the Buffalo before the event of Buffalo Ecocide. And one can take some heart in the fact that when Montanans are asked in a survey commissioned by the Defenders of Wildlife in 2014 whether buffalo should be given a chance to reestablish themselves at least in pockets of their former homelands, two out of three reply 'yes'.[12]

Still, even with this good news in hand, the forces that would speak on behalf of Buffalo in the regime that is settlement culture still find themselves at a disadvantage. The discursive sieve that drains away Buffalo and those who were at home with Buffalo, as well as the very habitat by which Buffalo's world was sustained, is still at work. What is most troubling about the historical marker naming 'Buffalo Country' as such is that it consigns Buffalo Ecocide to its past tense, *as if* it might have occurred in such a way that its legacy is without a present. One lives in a landscape *as if* once there were Buffalo Ecocide, but that this condition no longer pertains to the country where one now resides. In the discussion that follows regarding this point, the reader is to be forewarned: What is being attempted in this essay as a mode of philosophical field work is to render accountable a way of being oriented to the truth that in turn at every turn insists that truth not be told. And in the attempt to tell the truth of the systemic condition of not telling one's truth thinking itself needs to be brought into acknowledgement of a mode of one's purportedly speaking the truth such that even as one speaks it, one inevitably is taking back one's very words.

An exemplary moment of this far less than exemplary mode of discourse occurs when Poertner, explaining the passions behind the negative easement action directed toward Buffalo discussed above, gives this ultimate justification of its project:

> *The days of free-roaming buffalo are over as far as the landowners here are concerned. The west is not the same as it was 100 years ago. There's people here, there's farm ground, there's communities now too. The world has moved on. It's the modern world now, it's not something that existed 200 years ago, and there's plenty of bison for people to enjoy and look at at the National Bison Range in Moiese and Yellowstone National Park.*[13]

This moment in the interview with Poertner comes after he has made a case for the economic hardships—both potential and actual—that might be attributed to the movement to reintroduce free-ranging Buffalo back onto large tracts of land in his region. In doing so he worries about the reemergence of brucellosis, a disease that is devastating to cattle. He also worries about failure of eco-tourism to provide dollars for local residents. Others have worried as well at the capacity of fences to contain reintroduced Buffalo to their designated ranges.[14] These are certainly concerns to be addressed and outcomes to be avoided. Here one can imagine a spirited debate leading to perhaps creative solutions to the concerns being expressed.

But Poertner's final words are spoken in the mode, if not precisely the spirit of Socratic apology, which is to say, these are words offered in justification of the very principles by which he and his fellow landowners, not to mention their pioneer forebears, have led their lives. That he feels compelled to offer his apology here hints that more is afoot in this conversation than mere complaints about this or that outcome of various efforts at Buffalo restoration. As in the case of Socrates, the very question of whether or not one has led a life of which one should or should not be ashamed is being posed. To this end, the very notion of what the world is to be and who can call themselves at home in it is brought into the foreground. If Buffalo and those peoples who were at home with Buffalo were to return to this farm ground, to these communities, what would come of those who live here now? Poertner heads off any crisis that might ensue in taking this question seriously by erecting a discursive fence, complete with a discursive version of barbed wire, between the purported specter of a world that existed 100 years ago and for him no longer counts as world, and the purportedly true and actual world, the world of settlement, that exists here and now.

This mode of structuring the past peculiar to settlement peoples has been identified by Deborah Bird Rose as the imposition of the Year Zero.[15] By means of this practice of historical time keeping, what is to be taken as socially, politically and culturally binding 'here and now' is to be divided from that which 'then and there'[16] no longer counts as a reality, which is to say, that for which one need no longer be responsible. Of the world preceding the Year Zero, in which is marked the inauguration of a regime of settlement, one speaks *as if* there were no people, *as if* there was not fruitful habitat, *as if* there were no communities. As a result, when Poertner claims 'there's people here', this assertion functions only in the present, which is to say 'there's people here *now*'. In the regime of Buffalo Ecocide, not only Buffalo have been erased, or at the very least ghosted, but also the faces and lives and cultures of those humans who were at home with Buffalo on the short grass prairie in the very places that Poertner and his allies now call home. That at least is the logical conclusion one would need to draw from Poertner's own words, if one took them at their face value.

But the very attempt to take these words at their face value, to draw them into a careful analysis so that one might deliberate with Poertner and his allies over whether or not his claims make any sense, not to mention whether or not they are fair, is to miss the whole manner in which words such as these are proclaimed within the precincts of settlement culture in the first place. For precisely through his fashioning of discourse by means of a Year Zero, Poertner seeks to live with the fruits of Buffalo Ecocide without having to confront and take to heart their shameful, even blasphemous circumstances. Pointing out the senselessness if not outright scandal of arguing one's right to be at home in a world that was forcibly wrested away from others, *as if* the claims of those others no longer matter, *as if* the living kinds who were eradicated and ecosystems that were subjected to the plow and barbed-wire fence for the sake of one's own crops and livestock have no meaning, simply gains no traction in this situation. Indeed, the insistence on justice for the sake of those undone by a regime of Buffalo Ecocide may only serve to enflame even more outrage and possibly even murderous impulses on the part of those whose very hold upon their home world is now being put in peril.[17]

One is called upon, then, to witness the precarious condition of shamefulness in which settlement finds itself, and to become careful both of and for it. But to do this is not to agree in any way that arguments putting into question Poertner's claims regarding the fate of Buffalo on the high plains should not be made. Rather, before they might be made and, more importantly, be heard, a prior truth, indeed the apriori condition for the possibility of making all such arguments, calls for acknowledgement: namely, of the ignominy of a habitation upon

the face of an earth that has been wrested away in violence from others, both human and more-than-human.

And here these considerations hit home. For making and then acknowledging this distinction—between, on the one hand, arguments made regarding the wisdom of one's actions within the framework of one's world and, on the other, how one might offer one's reasons to justify the very inauguration of that world in the first place—is to find myself confronted anew with how I personally also am in complicity with Poertner's own misgivings in regard to the latter. For like him and his allies, and indeed, like all those who count themselves as inheritors and members of settlement culture, the question of how to live with the shame of the condition of settlement will not let go of me. Poertner might not agree that he is subjected to this shame, but nevertheless it can be witnessed in its perturbations of the very manner of how his apology, his justification for his way of life, is being made. And as with Poertner, the shamefulness of settlement saddles me with the question of how one might offer precisely an apology for one's life, which is to say, a justification for one's own presence on the face of this country, given the ignoble circumstances of the provenance of that presence. The question that settlement culture must confront is whether existence itself has become so shameful that there is no redoubt, no sanctuary in which one can find peace. Settlement's own history is indeed the nightmare from which it is trying to awaken.

At least one notion becomes clear when the matter is put in this way: Buffalo Ecocide is not simply an event once suffered by Buffalo and those peoples who lived (and still thankfully are striving to live[18]) in communion with this creature but is an affliction communicated down through the generations even to all those who live here and now in the name of settlement on the face of this country. Only in the acknowledgment of Buffalo Ecocide, not only in its past but also in its present tense, might one be called upon to live otherwise with the fruits of ecocide than by simply looking away from the violence of their provenance and then looking away from one's looking away from it. Only if one is willing to acknowledge that Buffalo Ecocide continues unabated and will continue to do so from here on out, can one even begin to gather up the means by which to live justly and perhaps in peace with this reality.

IV. There is Buffalo Ecocide

One is then called upon to declare: 'There is Buffalo Ecocide'. What makes pointedly affirming this reality ethically necessary, perhaps even noble, is not that in doing so a state of affairs is uncovered about which heretofore settlement culture had been in the dark; rather, testifying to this truth invites those who utter or hear it to embrace mindfully, courageously and with discernment what one already knows all too well to be true: that settlement existence, even here and now, is shot through with injustice both toward other humans and more-than-human living kinds. The secret that is revealed then is a persistent unwillingness to live with what it turns out after all is not a secret. Buffalo Ecocide only becomes a secret as one attempts to construct a world in which one looks away from one's all too painful entanglement in the genocidal and ecocidal circumstances in which one is already embroiled, and then looks away from one's looking away from it. The situation by which truth emerges from out of the dark in this context differs greatly from what has been understood traditionally in the Platonic account of truth as *anamnesis*. There the effect of uncovering what had been hidden from one's knowing is liberatory, as, in the onset of wonder over what is revealed one has been given to know, ignorance cedes to illumination. But in a world permeated by Buffalo Ecocide, the onset of understanding is pervaded with shame, as the violence that already percolates in one's knowing finally bubbles up to disturb the very possibility of being at home, or ever having

been at home, in one's reasoning about one's world. In the regime of Buffalo Ecocide, the crisis undergone by truth is one that is soterological rather than liberatory. One wonders whether one can ever be released from one's revulsion concerning the very circumstances of one's birth.

As witnessed above in both the analysis of the historical marker proclaiming 'Buffalo Country' and of the efforts of Fergus County landholders to establish a negative easement against Buffalo, for those who are discursively at home on the wheat fields and grasslands of North American settlement, to attempt to tell finally the story of Buffalo Ecocide in its present tense is to find oneself interrupting a story that was already in the process of being told, such that the story of Buffalo Ecocide is surreptitiously not being told. To be in this situation is to find oneself implicated from before one has opened one's mouth in a manner of proceeding in discourse, in which one has been called upon not only to circumvent a subject but also, in doing so, to circumvent the very question of one's circumvention. This doubling down of evasion constitutes an essential gesture by which violent regimes in general and settlement cultures in particular maintain their immunity from a questionable inauguration that, if only it were to emerge explicitly into view, would prove both shameful and harrowing. Evading this fate in turn becomes the organizing principle by which settlement's story of not telling its story proceeds.

Another way of putting this is that settlement is built upon not only the carrying out of ecocide but also the rationalization of what it insists is not to be recognized as ecocide, before, during and after the explicit carrying out of ecocide. Settler violence, then, involves not only what one does in the name of settlement but also how one speaks of what one does before the other to whom one does, has done, or will have done it. In the rationalization that is ecocide, one reasons out the meaning of one's actions so that those others, both human and more-than-human, upon whom one's violence is to fall remain unreal, which is to say, without a standing in discourse, at least, insofar as another might speak *as if* she or he seeks a standing in the discourse of those who are intent on perpetrating violence. In this way settlement's violence renders its object without the capacity to respond to and so to bear testimony regarding its violation. Indeed, it turns out, 'it' was not even there in the first place. In this way, ecocidal violence becomes antiseptic, the scrubbing away of inert matter from the scene of a crime that could not really have occurred anyway. In this way one's violence undoes its very beginning, so that the point in time to which it might have been traced, as a result, holding one accountable for the mayhem one has unleashed upon the face of the earth, dissipates in a delirium without limit. As is the case of genocidal discourse involving humans, ecocidal discourse involving a more-than-human world continues to be wrapped up in its own ongoing rationalization of its mayhem in regard to the very possibility of discourse, in its own disruption of speech that leaves no room at any turn for a response in what it continually insists without beginning or end is not a conversation.

V. Buffalo Returning Home to Buffalo Country

After a left turn southward at Malta and some 50 miles of dirt roads threading across a patchwork of wheat fields and grazing lands owned by local ranchers, I come to the gate to Sun Prairie, a section of the holdings of the American Prairie Reserve[19] where Buffalo Camp is located. Noticeable from the moment one passes through this entryway is the absence of any fences running along the road, such as those that have inevitably hemmed in the highways of my long traverse across the United States to get here. One cannot fault local farmers and ranchers for denying free public access to land dedicated to agricultural production, but if the public ends up living in a world from which it is persistently fenced out, its capacity

to know and love the very earth by which its life is sustained is denied it. Perhaps in that alienation from land are found the very beginnings of the regime now active upon the earth that is all too often hostile and for the most part insistently indifferent to the fate of so many living kinds. To rectify this situation, at least locally, the Reserve has installed what it terms a primitive camping site, although ice-cold well water and electrical service, as well as a fairly well-appointed outhouse, are part its interpretation of 'primitive'. Cell phone service even runs between one and two bars at the campsite itself. Most importantly, a sign appealing to the Scandinavian principle of *allemannsrett* invites the visitor to wander freely wherever her or his footsteps might lead, while being cautioned to exercise care for the wildlife and particularly the herd of several hundred buffalo who have also been given leave to roam this place. The sign, as well as other information provided by the Reserve, reminds visitors of the dangers implicit in visiting land that is being managed in such a way that respecting the wildness of its creatures is the first principle by which one's own behavior is to be governed.

Meadowlarks fill the air with their elaborate song. Several pairs of swifts dart amidst clouds of mosquitoes in the deepening, long evening of Summer Solstice. At the moment no other campers are here, although by the end of the day both an elderly couple from California and three young, newly-minted dentists from Georgia will show up. As I set up the trailer in the site I've reserved, I cannot get out of my mind the words of Crow medicine woman Pretty Shield as she remembers a moment some hundred and forty years earlier in the Judith Basin just south of here, when her family encountered the landscape of Buffalo Ecocide:[20]

> *My heart fell down when I began to see dead buffalo scattered all over the beautiful country, killed and skinned, left to rot by white men, many, many hundreds of buffalo. The whole country there smelled of rotting meat. Even the flowers could not put down the bad smell. Our hearts were like stone.*[21]

Pretty Shield then adds, 'And yet nobody believed, even then, that the white man would kill *all* the Buffalo. Since the beginning of things there had been so many'.[22]

And yet the very last great herd of free-ranging buffalo on the short grass prairie, indeed upon the whole of the earth, was destroyed just a few years later in 1882, along the Yellowstone River near Miles City a few hundred miles to the east of here. Alton Huffman, a photographer and hunter who was among the early settlers, wrote decades later: 'I saw the Rosebud valley more or less black with them from near where Lee now is to the present Busby, a distance of 40 miles'.[23] Estimates of the herd's size ran from 50,000 to 80,000. Learning of it, hunters in the area, along with their skinners, immediately descended upon it, so that by the winter it was no more. The next year, all efforts to locate another throng proved futile, and a few years after that even the stragglers were gone. Huffman reports in July of 1887 of finding 'two bulls near a ford not far from Birney...I saw them fall into the breaks east and realized that I would probably never again see another wild [buffalo]. I never have.'[24]

The next morning, as I walk the muddy tracks of a barely recognizable road into the low-lying, grassy hills east of the campground, I come upon a herd of Buffalo, perhaps 200 or so, strung out along some bottom land where the forage is richest. My way forward now blocked, I leave the road and climb a low ridge overlooking the animals, for the most part consisting of cows and their young feeding on tufts of grass sprouting among blooming prickly pears, thick stands of prairie sage, and dried seedpods of field cress. Here and there among the herd, individuals are wallowing in the earth. On the end of the long string of animals closest to me, I spy several bulls, slightly removed from the others as they playfully gambol about and jostle one another. Given their immense size, this is a disconcerting sight. These would be the

younger males who as of yet don't have mating rights and live out their days, at least for the time being, in more or less jovial bachelorhood society. At the other end of the herd would likely be the matriarch, the alpha female, who provides leadership for the other cows as they organize their day around feeding and nurturing their recently-born calves.

Yet, even in this idyllic scene of Buffalo resurgence, Buffalo Ecocide remains a decisive factor. I cannot help but think of how the hunters of that final great herd might have envisioned this one. Historical testimony has been provided that the shooters often wounded a lead cow in the hip so that, humping over in pain, she would become incapacitated and not flee while those gathered loyally by her remained to be picked off one by one. The only limit to how many Buffalo could be killed by this method, it is reported, had to do with how fast the skinners could work.[25]

In the benign circumstances in which I and these Buffalo find ourselves, it might seem as if the regime of violence is over, as if one should have better things to do with one's imagination than to reanimate through it such untoward and heartless memories. But even in the best of situations, the precariousness of Buffalo resurgence is in evidence to knowing eyes. Wildlife Biologist James Bailey for one notes that, even if bison are no longer in immediate danger of extinction through numerical collapse, such as occurred to a species like the passenger pigeon, it still remains a factor. And one must add to this prospect that of at least two other possible modes of extinction, namely, ecological and genetic,[26] which are currently threatening the 50,000 or so animals in conservation herds across the continent, including the one before me now. In the case of ecological extinction, buffalo might continue to exist as a boutique species but would no longer provide the important ecological services to the grassland eco-systems with which they co-evolved and in which they were once at home. In the case of genetic extinction, buffalo would continue to exist but with a genotype that would be increasingly unrecognizable as 'the hardy, efficient, disease-resistant, alert, agile, awe-inspiring animal—the truly wild bison of our history and legends'.[27] The buffalo of tomorrow might well be in the same relationship to the buffalo of yesteryear, as present day cattle are to the now-extinct aurochs of Eurasia.

Following the ridge to the right to evade the herd, I descend into a shallow hollow where a small pond, bordered by tall rushes tossing restlessly in the persistent wind, neighbors upon a prairie dog colony. Yipping abounds as the inhabitants alert one another to my presence. Precisely here is a site where buffalo resurgence is demonstrably resisting ecological extinction, as these two keystone species of the short grass prairie are being given leave to work again in tandem, each making their own contributions as plain citizens of this ecosystem to the restoration and ultimately the thriving of its habitat. As buffalos wallow and dogs tunnel, the land all around me is being prepared for plant species like the healthy stands of scarlet globemallow, interspersed with sego-lily, curly-leaf gumweed, hood's phlox, field chickweed, spreading fleabane and a host of other wildflowers currently blooming about my feet. A few more steps and I come to a healthy offering of Buffalo manure circled by mushrooms sprouting along its edges. Bailey discusses how the presence of buffalo dung enhances the habitat of several species of ants and beetles making their home in the short grass prairie, not to mention returning important minerals and elements to the soil. And somewhere on these holdings, I have been told, the very carcasses of buffalo who have died are being left in situ so that their remains might be returned to the soil in order to nurture the land by which these in turn had been nurtured. Indeed, the many ways in which buffalo might contribute ecologically to the reemergence of short grass prairie are too numerous to even list here. But my own

favorite among these is how buffalo wool, as it is shed, liberally provides a handy water-repellent material to be used by small mammals and birds in insulating their nests.[28]

In all of this buffalo are being given the opportunity to be far more than 'working animals', as I have heard them termed at least once by those who are critical of the Reserve's scheme to rewild buffalo but do not object to the possibility of raising buffalo livestock for industrial meat production. As working animals, buffalo are required 'to earn their keep' through the sale of their flesh and other body parts for human consumption. In effect, they are being valued as nothing more than a mouth and four stomachs necessary to amass from a grass diet consumable protein for humans. For this reason alone, the genetic future of buffalo in production herds is bleak, as they are persistently bred for traits leading to greater benefit and lower cost to their owners. But on the American Prairie Reserve, the intention is to call upon the buffalo, as biotic citizens in their own right, who might restore in their own fashion of doing things the short grass prairie habitat that was nearly wiped out along with the buffalo themselves in the Year Zero of Buffalo Ecocide. Much controversy swirls around how much autonomy the herds of this reserve can be allowed in the carrying out of this noble task, how much they can be left to their own instincts in grazing and roaming the land allotted to them.[29] Time will tell.

Lisa Sideris speaks of the 'wow!' factor that often drives both scientific and public interest in rewilding and de-extinction schemes.[30] Such schemes, it can be argued, in so far as they are merely guided by the 'coolness' of what they would accomplish—'think of it, great herds of Buffalo roaming freely upon the earth again'—can quickly fall into deeply disrespectful treatment of the living kinds involved. One needs to keep in mind that the ensembles of behaviors and traits by which the very essence of a species is expressed are only achieved through its own ongoing and complex interactions with a habitat. For instance, the size and shape of a buffalo's teeth, the digestive juices in its mouth and stomach, and the social behavior of the herd in which it is foraging are all deeply intertwined.[31] The very existence of buffalo as a living kind involves a vast temporal achievement, as generation upon generation of this creature's ancestors have struggled to reproduce and so pass on a highly complex form of life that is continually being reworked in regard to the habitat in which it finds itself. Thus, buffalo both contribute to and are the outcome of a complex web of entanglements - cultural, social, ecological, biochemical, physiological and more—by which it, as does any other species, assumes its relational identity.[32]

In a time of Buffalo Ecocide, then, not only wonder at the buffalo's existence but also compassion for its plight are called for, as one confronts the fact that any attempt at rewilding involves placing these animals in an environment so altered, regardless of how well a grazing range has been previously managed, that inevitably the members of the herd must be asked to some degree or another to find themselves anew as a species. One must not act as if one's having diminished the habitat of a living kind as extensively as has occurred to the buffalo in the American settlement of this continent's great grasslands does not in turn leave that creature in diminished and even precarious circumstances regarding its present and future. One must be cautioned against becoming irresponsibly optimistic about the actual plight that both humans and buffalo face in the wake of an event as ecologically destructive as Buffalo Ecocide. Whatever is reemerging on the American Prairie Reserve, it will not involve the straightforward restoration of an ecosystem that once required, for instance, unfettered roaming and dispersal of its living kinds across extraordinarily broad expanses of land. What automobiles and their humans are barely allowed, as they roam on the narrow corridor afforded by Route 2 across the great reaches of the northern plains, will not be granted again

to the buffalo. What emerges from the interaction of buffalo, prairie dogs, grasses and all the rest that now in our present circumstances show up on the American Prairie Reserve might prove significant in its own right, but it will also remain forever marked by the devastating and deanimating fruits of Buffalo Ecocide.

In responding to this present moment of Buffalo Ecocide, perhaps the most important contribution the Reserve might make is the inauguration in its human managers and visitors of new habits of knowing one's world through the manner in which another living kind renders it intelligible. In the practice of zoognosis, a term that has been coined by marine veterinarian Dr. Claire Simeone,[33] one participates in a circle of knowing between the human and the more-than-human, in which one both learns from and contributes to the learning of another creature. In doing so, one comes to know one's world anew in a way that one could not have anticipated solely through one's all too human capacities.

Those hunters from the Year Zero, mentioned above, the ones who wounded the lead cow in the hip in order to wipe out the entire community of her kind gathered around her, were arguably practicing a mode of zoognosis, but one that was permeated with betrayal of the very creature from whom one was learning to envision the world anew. The far-heartedness[34] of that knowing, in which one entered intimately into the mind of another creature not only in order to take its own life merely for the sake of its eradication, but also to wipe out the lives of all of its kind that might come after it, was and remains shameful. Much of the manner in which the world of settlement engages in congress with other living creatures continues to be framed by modes of deanimation and manipulation not unlike this: one learns to know the mind of another living kind in order to use it against its better interests.

But on my final day at Buffalo Camp the roles are reversed. Early on that drizzly morning while contemplating whether or not I should take a walk, I look out across a field to the muddied road leading to my trailer site only to discover three young bulls, the very animals I had watched several days before at the edge of the grazing herd, pacing slowly and deliberately toward me now in single file. They too, it seems, were taking advantage of the Reserve's policy of *allemannsrett*. The measured, unhurried pace of their progress, given their size and mass, was arresting. They were, it turned out, engaged in a daily ritual that I had missed witnessing before this, in which they show up in the very camp where I was residing in order to claim it for an hour or so for themselves. They were particularly interested in the markers for numbering each campsite, each one consisting of a solid, wooden pole about three feet in height and a foot in diameter. These it turned out were a perfect fit for scratching the underside of each bull. This went on for at least an hour, as the three animals, who were obviously quite familiar with one another, at times took turns using a specific shaft. At other times they used the markers near one another as they grunted to each other in pleasure, adjusting their hindquarters in various attitudes to vigorously scratch at the various itches and tick bites plaguing them.

Two images stick with me from that day. In the first, one of the bulls looks at me from about 30 feet away, as I open the door of my trailer to move to my car for better viewing and a more secure vantage. His gaze is direct, and its meaning is unavoidable: I am to behave. If I keep my distance during his visit, nothing untoward need occur. The second image is of two of the bulls as they saunter off together, now side by side after their scratching orgy, crossing a field in that slow, deliberate pace, as they move toward some cottonwoods bordering a creek and the grassy meadow lying beyond. Their closely-attuned companionship moves me; I find myself envious of it.

In these moments of intimate encounter and learning is being offered the possibility for a mode of liturgy of an altogether other sort than that precipitated by the historical marker on Route 2, analyzed above, announcing one's entry into 'Buffalo Country'. What was missing there was precisely the Buffalo, not only as they were, but as they are, and are coming to be.[35] On the American Prairie Reserve, buffalo are to be found who have been given leave to engage in their own homecoming on these lands, one that in turn makes the possibility of my homecoming, even in a time still defined by Buffalo Ecocide, far less shameful and far more inspiring. A friend recently mentioned how moral psychologist Carol Gilligan has argued that to be human is to have a voice, but to be a human whose voice is heard is to become a person.[36] In the practices of zoognosis made possible in the environs of Buffalo Camp, the voices of buffalo are being heard. Finally, they are coming home to a world that might recognize them not only as a living kind to be managed but also as creaturely persons demanding in their own right our respect and admiration, our wonder and compassion. In such a landscape the capacity of buffalo themselves not only to be an object of but also to participate meaningfully in our civic liturgies is affirmed. In this, buffalo are offered the opportunity to show us in their own right the way from living in a world that simply consists of one's efforts on behalf of one's own all-too-human goals to one in which we engage in the recuperation if not full restoration of an ecosystem as a great work, one to be accomplished both through and on behalf of all creatures of the short grass prairie. Even as the shameful truth of Buffalo Ecocide persists, much good can come of this.

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Endnotes

1. Richard Manning, Grassland: the History, Biology, Politics and Promise of the American Prairie, Penguin Books, New York, 1995, p. 20.

2. Defenders of Wildlife, <https://defenders.org/bison/basic-facts>

3. This occurred with the signing of the National Bison Legacy Act on 9 May, 2016. See: Elahe Izadi, 'It's official: America's first national mammal is the bison', The Washington Post, 9 May, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2016/04/27/how-the-bison-once-nearing-extinction-lived-to-become-americas-national-mammal/?utm_term=.c33ea697146f>

4. David Murray. '"Not on my property": Central Montana ranchers say no to bison'. Great Falls Tribune. 24 March, 2017, <http://gftrib.com/2nMJ6ch>

5. David Murray.

6. Emmanuel Levinas. 'Signification and Sense', Humanism of the Other, trans. Nidra Poller, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2006, p. 28.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, p. 29.

8. Michael Purcell, 'Liturgy: Divine and Human Service', Heythrop Journal, vol.38, no.2, 1997, p.148

9. Deborah Bird Rose, Reports from a Wild Country: ethics for decolonisation, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004, p. 37

10. Buffalo Genocide – understood as the intentional wiping out of a living kind – is inextricably enmeshed with Buffalo Ecocide – the intentional wiping out of the very habitat by which that living kind has found itself at home in the world. The very attack upon buffalo that was a feature of settlement culture proves as well to be an attack upon the short grass prairie through which buffalo thrived. For this reason, in this paper the term 'Buffalo Ecocide' will be used as a stand-in for both notions of erasure, for both genocide and ecocide. Further, complicating the naming of Buffalo Ecocide is the fact that through it not only buffalo are left shorn of their sustaining habitat, but also a variety of other living kinds, as well those human peoples who were at home with buffalo in these environs before settlement.

11. Deborah Bird Rose, p. 71.

12. David Murray.

13. David Murray.

14. Traci Eatherton, 'Montana ranchers oppose creation of largest nature reserve in US'. The Fencepost. 14 May, 2018, <https://www.thefencepost.com/news/montana-rafonchers-oppose-creation-of-the-largest-nature-reserve-in-us>

15. Deborah Bird Rose, pp. 57-61.

16. With the imposition of the Year Zero, settlement culture enacts not only a division of time as it is lived by the settler into a 'now' and a 'then', but also space as it is inhabited into a 'here' and a 'there'. In this way, not only the time but also the space in which the short grass prairie and its living kinds thrived is at best treated as ghostly, and at worst simply evaporates. One lives then in Buffalo Country as if it only existed as a dream, or worse, as a whimsy with which one can now playfully interact without attention to the ramifications of its legacy, which is to say, of its axiological connectivity to and entanglement in one's own time and space. It is as if in settlement culture time and space itself, in so far as they are axiologically real, in so far as they are capable of transmitting values, were created anew and ex nihilo. In this way, Settlement Culture functions as its own Divinity.

17. Emmanuel Levinas speaks pointedly of the peril that is undergone in one's calling upon those who live in the throe of unacknowledged guilt to attend to the plight of those they have harmed. In this situation, one needs to be wary of and careful in approaching the offender who 'unaware of his deeper thoughts' is incapable of acknowledging not only his guilt but also his surreptitious strategies for avoiding the acknowledgment of guilt. As Levinas puts it: 'The offender is in essence unaware...The aggressiveness of the offender is the lack of attention par excellence'. [Emmanuel Levinas, 'To the Other', Nine Talmudic Readings, trans. Annette Aronowicz, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990, p. 25.] This insight leads Levinas to ask two questions that can be understood as well to reverberate throughout the regime of Buffalo Ecocide: 'Is the offender capable of measuring the extent of his wrongdoing? Do we know the limits of our ill will?' [Levinas, p. 25]

18. While this paper focuses on the reintroduction and rewilding of buffalo on the American Prairie Reserve, a recent series of tribal initiatives across the state of Montana, including on the Fort Peck and Blackfoot reservations to restore conservation herds of buffalo to tribal lands also deserve attention. These projects, which depend upon buffalo culled from the Yellowstone Herd, have been controversial within settlement culture and misunderstood even by potential allies. See: Jeremy Hance, "How Native American tribes are bringing back the bison from brink of extinction," The Guardian, 12 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/12/how-native-american-tribes-are-bringing-back-the-bison-from-brink-of-extinction>.

19. The American Prairie Reserve, established in 1999, is characterized by its originator Sean Gerrity as a 'habitat assembly project', in which ultimately as many as 25,000 buffalo and several packs of wolves would find themselves at home on a restored short grass prairie ecosystem comprised of 3.5 million acres. Currently the Reserve, consisting of just under 300,000 acres, hosts several hundred more or less free-ranging buffalo located in the Sun Prairie section of the Reserve and shadowed by a noisy pack (at least at night) of coyotes. See: Yale E360, Hilary Rosner, 'Dreaming of a Place Where the Buffalo Roam', 2 August 2012, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/sean_gerrity_american_prairie_reserve_montana>.

20. The landscape in which this scene occurs is today located in Fergus County, the same area where the negative easement movement described in this paper is resisting the reintroduction of buffalo.

21. Frank B. Linderman, Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1974, p. 144.

22. Frank B. Linderman.

23. S. M. Adams and A.R. Dood, Background Information for Issues of Concern for Montana: Plains Bison Ecology, Management, and Conservation, 2011, p. 25, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, <https://leg.mt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2011-2012/EQC/Meeting-Documents/October-2011/plains-bison-background.pdf>

24. S. M. Adams.

25. S. M. Adams, p. 23.

26. James A. Bailey, American Plains Bison: Rewilding an Icon, Sweetgrass Books, Helena, 2013, pp. 44-51.

27. James A. Bailey, p. 51

28. James A. Bailey, p. 46.

29. Traci Eatherton.

30. Lisa Sideris, Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017, p. 186

31. James A. Bailey, p. 56.

32. Van Dooren discusses how extinction consists of the unraveling of the multiple threads of entanglement by which each species is sustained through its interaction with the world environing it. This is to understand a species not so much as an identity but as a complex of relations. As a result, a species' descent into extinction undergoes many perturbations, depending on how the threads of interconnection that sustain it are being diminished, damaged or lost altogether. See: Thom Van Dooren, Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014, pp. 12-13.

33. See the discussion of this term in her Ted Talk that can be found at: <http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/about-us/News-Room/2018-news-archives/ted-talk.html>

34. With special thanks to Linda Hogan for this word derived from a concept she ascribes to the San (Bushmen) people. See: Linda Hogan, Dwellings: a Spiritual History of the Living World, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1995, p. 45.

35. Even as this claim is made, it must be tempered by the admission that the discussion in this paper has left in the main unaddressed numerous efforts of First Peoples across the face of Buffalo Country to engage in repatriation of buffalo on tribal reserves. Indeed, the very fact that buffalo survived as a living kind is due in no small part to the intervention of farseeing individuals of various tribal affiliations at decisive moments (see: Ken Zontek, Buffalo Nation: American Indian Efforts to Restore the Bison, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2007, esp. pp. 33-51). Further, in focusing on the situation of settlement culture in regard to Buffalo Ecocide, the intertwining of this regime with that of genocide, both cultural and physical, carried out by Settlement Peoples against First Peoples, has been constantly implied but not explicitly illuminated. Among a rich and emerging discussion of these issues by scholars in Cultural and Native American Studies, the reader is directed to an essay by Tasha Hubbard (Tasha Hubbard, '"The Buffaloes are Gone" or "Return: Buffalo"? - The Relationship of the Buffalo to Indigenous Creative Expression', The Canadian Journal of Native Studies, vol. XXIX, nos. 1&2, 2009, p. 67) in which she calls upon First Peoples of the plains to take seriously anew the maxim, 'The Buffalo is also our Education'. As a supplement to Hubbard's approach, the essay above has been written to probe how those in Settlement Culture are called upon to address its precarious situation in regard to its history, particularly to its entanglement with Buffalo and the short grass prairie, without in the process taking on the mantle of other cultural traditions to carry out this project. To do otherwise would only end up re-inscribing practices of cultural diminishment and appropriation by Settlement Peoples upon First Peoples that were core elements in the regimes of genocide and ecocide by which the American West was originally settled. This does not mean the discussion as it has proceeded in this paper can be justified as above criticism in regard to these matters, but rather that it is impossible to proceed in any manner whatsoever in this discussion without the limits of any given approach and the sobering criticism to which it inevitably deserves to be submitted pertaining as well. Legacies of genocide can no more be undone than can those of ecocide. Both remain to trouble from within whatever words one might offer in resistance to them.

36. Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. xvi.