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# The Bison and the Cow: Food, Empire, Extinction

*John Levi Barnard*

Every day while we are in this place, and they are likely to be many, I will shoot a buffalo and you shall cook his hump!

—James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (1827)

and one was not dead  
or it had come back from there,  
walked out of the dark mountains  
of rotted flesh and bony fur,  
like a prophet

—Linda Hogan, “Return: Buffalo” (1993)

In May 2016, President Barack Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act, adopting the bison as “the national mammal of the United States.” The act recognizes “the cultural, historical, and economic significance of the bison” to the nation, foregrounding its associations with Native American history and culture, as well as its status as an iconic animal within the American environmental imagination.<sup>1</sup> As US Representative Lacy Clay remarked, the “American bison” is both “an enduring symbol” of “boundless western wildness” and “an integral part of the still largely untold story of Native Americans and their historic contributions to our national identity.” Senator Martin Heinrich asserted that the bison embodies “American strength and resilience,” and that its new status would “bring a new source of pride for Americans” as well as “greater attention to ongoing conservation and species recovery efforts.” And John Calvelli, of the Wildlife Conservation Society, identified the bison as an “icon” of American “values such as unity, resilience and healthy landscapes and communities.”<sup>2</sup>

These optimistic assertions, however, belie the actual histories of both the bison and the Indigenous people the act purports to acknowledge. Prior to colonization, thirty million bison inhabited the North American plains; by the end of the nineteenth century, only a few hundred remained, scattered in captive herds.<sup>3</sup> The bison were nearly eradicated in what was simultaneously an

unregulated wave of capital accumulation and a genocidal policy of territorial conquest peaking in the 1870s and 1880s, just as a conservation movement was emerging to protect what remained of the species.<sup>4</sup> Today, bison in conservation herds number around thirty thousand, but this is hardly evidence of “resilience.” Currently listed as “near threatened” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the bison exists in a state of what scientists call “ecological extinction,” unable to perform its prior function in relation to its ecosystem and entirely dependent on human intervention for its survival.<sup>5</sup> And though the rhetoric of “species recovery” generally refers to conservation herds in protected spaces like Yellowstone National Park, the primary mechanism of bison preservation is literally bison consumption: while thirty thousand currently live in some semblance of the wild, there are over three hundred thousand in commercial populations across North America, with sixty thousand slaughtered annually in the United States alone.<sup>6</sup>

While consumption of the protected species may seem counterintuitive as a strategy of conservation, the conservation movement in the United States has never been at odds with consumption *per se*. Indeed, early conservationists like Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell were both cattle ranchers and big game hunters, whose primary interest in species preservation was in preserving their ability to kill and eat those species themselves.<sup>7</sup> And such figures—mostly white and male, many committed to the linked projects of eugenics and empire—generally agreed with Roosevelt that “while it is greatly to be regretted that the species is likely to become extinct,” that extinction was nonetheless necessary to “the advance of white civilization in the West.”<sup>8</sup> Conservation efforts thus consisted of neither the restoration of populations nor the protection of individual animals from human violence but the enclosure of bison herds within either national parks or private ranches and game preserves, creating, on the one hand, symbolic spaces of ecological nationalism and, on the other, opportunities for upper-class white men to revive through recreation and commodification what their own imperial and commercial enterprises had largely destroyed.

Given its association with these sites of enclosure—whether the public park or the private ranch—we can see how bison conservation has always been aligned with a culture of consumption embedded in the larger context of colonization. Yet the predominant narrative of conservation, which the Bison Legacy Act reiterates, tends to obscure these affiliations. Celebrating the bison’s survival as a national triumph while ignoring the nation’s responsibility for its near annihilation in the first place, the Legacy Act effectively inscribes into law the bison’s iconic stature within the discourses of exceptionalist historiography and

mainstream environmentalism. These discourses shape a redemption narrative for the nation and species: with respect to national history, the bison has been framed as the tragic but necessary casualty of US development; with respect to the species, its recovery is evidence of the success of the conservationism that emerged after the closing of the continental frontier. As opposed to Indigenous accounts that recognize what Tasha Hubbard calls “buffalo genocide” as one front in a larger “colonial war on nature,” US historical and environmental discourses transform the bison from a site of imperial violence and ecological destruction into a symbol of American exceptionalism and sustainability.<sup>9</sup>

This appropriation of the indigenous species as a sign of the settler nation exemplifies what Nicole Shukin calls the “semiotic currency” of “animal capital.”<sup>10</sup> In Shukin’s theorization, animal capital takes two forms—the material and the symbolic—each of which accumulates through a distinct mode of “rendering.” In the case of the symbolic, the animal is rendered into a “natural, self-evident sign of the nation.”<sup>11</sup> As Shukin argues of the beaver in relation to Canada, the bison becomes an “innocent” stand-in for a violent history of settler colonialism and resource extraction in the United States, a sign of “wild” American nature that elides the expropriation of indigenous territory while advancing the idea of the settler “nation as an indigenous organism.”<sup>12</sup> The beaver and the bison make clear that both extinction and conservation are aspects of colonization, and the Bison Legacy Act is above all else a colonizing gesture of the kind Jodi Byrd has described, through which “what was external” has been “repeatedly and violently reimagined and remade as internal.” Such internalization, as Byrd has argued, allows settler culture “to disavow the ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples that is necessary for the United States to exist,” and the various official statements in response to the Legacy Act reinforce the internalizing gesture by collapsing the distinction between settler and Native histories into the figure of the bison.<sup>13</sup> As both the animal sign of indigeneity and the “national mammal” of the United States, the bison makes the “untold story of Native Americans” available as a resource for what Representative Clay calls “*our* national identity” while facilitating a collective disavowal of what Shukin calls the “cultural and ecological genocides” that have constituted settler colonial history.<sup>14</sup> This is all too evident in the Legacy Act and the rhetoric surrounding it, which exemplifies the way such symbolic rendering obscures “the material violence of the nation” via the “mythopoetic invocation of animal signs.”<sup>15</sup> And the “material violence” obscured by the sign of the bison consists not only of US imperialism as a matter of human history but also of the subjection of the creature itself to the second mode of rendering Shukin identifies. If the first mode refers to the representational



work of the artist, the second refers to the operation of the slaughterhouse, the material processing of animal bodies into commodities. Though distinct, these two modes of rendering—the “semiotic” and the “carnal”—are inextricable, bound up in what Shukin calls “a tangle of biopolitical relations within which the economic and symbolic capital of animal life can no longer be sorted into binary distinction.”<sup>16</sup>

This essay tracks this tangle as it has developed across the species histories of the bison and the cow in North America, with a specific focus on the complex interrelation between symbolic and material renderings of the bison in the contexts of settler colonialism and conservationism in the United States. But while the focus here is on the bison’s emergence as the US “national mammal,” the slippage between national (US) and continental (North American) frameworks reminds us that the story of the bison is a transnational, anti- or even ante-national one, and its material setting is perhaps better designated by the term *ecosystem* than by any particular coordinates in the geography of nation-states. As opposed to the state-based cartography colonization imposes, the idea of the ecosystem highlights what Indigenous writers and cultures of the region tend to describe as a web of human and nonhuman “relations,” and brings into focus the “severing” of those relations that settler colonialism has wrought.<sup>17</sup> Though at one time the bison ranged as far east as Pennsylvania and Virginia, its population has historically been concentrated within the ecosystem of what English-speaking settlers have called the prairies or the plains, the vast area extending from the Texas–Mexico borderlands to Alberta and Saskatchewan in the north. Colonialism disrupted ecosystemic relations across the borders of North American settler states, but the bison has played an especially prominent role as both carnal and symbolic animal capital in the United States, figuring prominently in the narration and iconography of the nation’s imperial development, even as that development drove the species to the brink of extinction.

The bison achieved this status as a national symbol through an outpouring of cultural production across the nineteenth century, from the writings of James Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant to the paintings of George Catlin and Albert Bierstadt (fig. 1). This wave of literary and visual rendering emerged in tandem with the bison’s commodification, and the correlation of animal sign with animal commodity remains evident today in a conservationist program consisting largely of commercial production and consumption. Though most accounts of its near eradication focus on the market for its valuable hide, I attend to the bison—in both nineteenth-century and contemporary contexts—as *food*. In this analysis the edible flesh becomes the site at which the carnal

and symbolic aspects of animal capital, as well as the narratives of conquest and conservation, effectively converge. In the sections that follow, I consider how the bison's image and its flesh have been appropriated for an American exceptionalist mythology—first in the nineteenth-century literature of the US “frontier” and then in contemporary discourses of environmentalism and sustainability—before turning to critical reappropriations of the bison in the works of the Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan and the Canadian First Nations artist Kent Monkman. Across the literature of US expansion, the bison was a sign of wilderness inevitably yielding to the progress of civilization while also serving as a kind of ritual meal for white settlers and tourists on the prairie. Through acts of actual ingestion these settlers viscerally replicate the internalization of the external that Byrd describes, while at the same time mourning the loss of a wild food supply they themselves are destroying. Similarly, American eaters today can signal a commitment to environmentalism by choosing the meat of the bison over that of the cow, investing in notions of sustainability and resilience that are equally operable in the Bison Legacy Act and the marketing materials for a variety of buffalo meat products available now—products that literally incarnate, as the Texas-based meat-bar company Epic Provisions declares, “the timeless forces of power, resilience, and freedom embodied by our forefathers.”<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 1.**  
George Catlin, *Buffalo Chase with Bows and Lances*, 1832–1833, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The colonizing nature of both nineteenth- and twenty-first-century American cultures of bison eating is almost too obvious, literalizing what Hogan has described as a colonial “hunger” that “crosses oceans” to consume new territory and the creatures it finds there.<sup>19</sup> But the marketing rhetoric of meat producers like Epic, similarly to the language of the Legacy Act itself, evokes the animal sign in a way that both denies and downplays the geopolitical and ecological violence of US nation-building, ironically asserting the “resilience” of the bison as evidence of the sustainability of an economy that rendered it functionally extinct and that now preserves its species life as part of a meat industry that is the largest driver of species extinctions worldwide.<sup>20</sup> And if the appropriative rhetoric of bison marketing and bison commemoration can be traced to literary and historical accounts of the expansion of US Empire across the nineteenth century, writers and artists like Hogan and Monkman undo the bison’s affiliation with settler colonial histories, economies, and identities, refiguring the iconic animal as a sign not only of the unsustainability of the imperial project but also of a possible future beyond it.

### The Forms of Being

The power of the animal sign to obscure a violent history is readily apparent in the adoption of the bison as the national mammal of the United States, but that adoption only perpetuates a long tradition of assimilating the bison to what Representative Clay calls “America’s story.” Throughout the nineteenth century, the bison was enlisted in literary texts and visual renderings as a figure for the process driving its eradication, providing a charismatic emblem for a wild ecosystem and a “primitive” way of life that was inevitably disappearing as the nation expanded. Through these settler colonial modes of representation, the bison was linked with the idea of the “vanishing Indian,” with both human and nonhuman populations figured as sacrificial victims of civilizational progress.<sup>21</sup> Underpinning this ideology of inevitability was the providential idea of “Manifest Destiny” in concert with an emergent scientific discourse of evolution and extinction that explained the vanishing of Indigenous peoples and their bison economies through a narrative of biological progress.<sup>22</sup> These theories of national destiny and natural selection would join the discourses, as Jodi Byrd has enumerated them, of “savagery, Indianness, discovery, and mapping that served to survey a world into European possession by transforming indigenous peoples into the *homo nullius* inhabitants of lands emptied and awaiting arrival.”<sup>23</sup>

William Cullen Bryant's 1833 poem "The Prairies" draws together these wide-ranging discourses in a near-perfect illustration of Byrd's contention, as the romantic speaker finds himself "alone" in a "wilderness" emptied of its Indigenous inhabitants and awaiting white settlement.<sup>24</sup> In Bryant's lyric, Native Americans have been neither displaced nor removed; they have simply "left the blooming wilds" to seek a "wider hunting-ground," just as the "bison feeds no more" upon "these plains." Like the Indian, the bison has moved away, and that "majestic brute, in herds that shake / The earth with thundering steps," now resides "Twice twenty leagues / Beyond remotest smoke of hunter's camp." "Thus change the forms of being," the speaker concludes, transforming colonial expropriation and its consequent regional extinctions into natural processes of biological and civilizational succession, culminating in the "arrival" of white Americans in the *terra nullius* of the prairie.

From the fifteenth century onward, this arrival entailed the influx not only of an invasive human population but also of an array of nonhuman beings, including domestic plants and animals, as well as deadly pathogens like smallpox. This invasive coalition contributed to a process Alfred Crosby labeled "ecological imperialism," which devastated Indigenous populations and radically transformed ecosystems and food systems around the world.<sup>25</sup> Most important to European colonizers of North America were their domestic animals, especially pigs, sheep, cows, and other livestock. Virginia DeJohn Anderson has called these the "creatures of empire," and their role within the settler enterprise cannot be overstated, in terms of either their geopolitical and ecological impact or their ideological function within a discourse of civilization that enabled and justified colonization.<sup>26</sup> As Anderson argues, for early English settlers, raising livestock "was not just a way to make a living; it was also a way of life," one they "regarded as normative and emblematic of civilized existence."<sup>27</sup> These settlers thus understood their colonial prerogative to include not only the displacement of Indigenous people and the expropriation of their lands but also the transformation of complex ecosystems to the comparative homogeneity of agricultural landscapes dominated by domesticated animals. Bryant's poem indicates the persistence of this view into the nineteenth century, as the uprooted Indigenous societies and nonhuman species of the Illinois "frontier" are replaced by not only "the laugh of children, the soft voice / Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn / Of Sabbath worshippers" but also the "low of herds" and the "rustling of the heavy grain"—the subdued sounds of agriculture and animal husbandry that follow the "thundering steps" of the departed bison.

The publication of “The Prairies” coincided with the extinction of the bison east of the Mississippi River, but farther to the west the species remained relatively abundant until after the Civil War.<sup>28</sup> So while it could only serve as a conspicuous absence in Bryant’s poem in 1833, the bison would be a vital presence in Washington Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies* two years later. Recounting his travels as part of Henry Ellsworth’s mission to survey the Oklahoma and Kansas territories for potential relocation of southeastern tribes targeted by the policy of “Indian Removal,” Irving’s *Tour* “inaugurates the genre of western tourist memoir,” which Stephanie LeMenager has identified as a form of “conquest preceding . . . the more certain outcomes of international and interracial war.”<sup>29</sup> While Ellsworth’s official mission was to survey the prairies with an eye to Indian resettlement, Irving and others were attached to the group as *tourists*, traveling with the express aim of “mingling with absolutely savage life.”<sup>30</sup> And for white tourists like Irving this meant encountering Indigenous people and killing and consuming bison. As Irving observed of one of his younger traveling companions, nothing “could restrain [his] romantic ardour for a campaign of buffalo-hunting with the Osages,” while the prospect of “arriving at the adventurous hunting grounds of the Pawnees, and of coming upon the traces of the buffaloes, made every eye sparkle with animation.”<sup>31</sup>

Irving and his companions do encounter buffalo, killing and eating them as often as they can.<sup>32</sup> At one point the group kills eight bison in a day, “feasting” that evening “upon roasted joints, broiled marrow-bones, and the juicy hump, far famed among the epicures of the prairies.”<sup>33</sup> Irving here affirms a broadly held opinion of the buffalo as what Cooper had described—in his 1827 novel *The Prairie*—as the “exquisite food of the American deserts.”<sup>34</sup> Cooper’s assessment introduces a scene in which the aging trapper Natty Bumppo and the young bee hunter Paul Hover savor the “richness, delicacy, and wildness of flavour” of a buffalo’s hump Natty has roasted in a pit. In their appreciation of the meal, Cooper’s frontiersmen emphasize that the roasted bison is not only delicious but *authentic* in its indigeneity and the manner of its preparation. Natty’s is the “cookery of the wilderness,” as opposed to the “meretricious cookery” of the “settlements.” Such a wilderness cuisine emphasizes the “genuine riches of natur’,” and thus achieves—“without need from spices, or any of your biting mustard to give it a foreign relish”—a “decided superiority” over the artificial and “labored compounds” of even the “most renowned restaurateur.”<sup>35</sup>

The focus on authenticity and simplicity would be at home in the marketing materials for a company like Epic Provisions, which advertises its products as “real foods” that are “pasture centered, and, most importantly, delicious.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet as food historians such as Mark McWilliams, Keith Stavely, and Kathleen Fitzgerald have shown, the rhetoric of culinary authenticity was already aligned with early nineteenth-century discourses concerning the nation's mission and the character of its people.<sup>37</sup> Just as Epic offers consumers a respite from the ethical and environmental implications of industrial agriculture and processed foods, literary depictions of hunting and consuming buffalo reflect a desire to reclaim and cultivate a form of culinary "simplicity" that was giving way to increasing "sophistication" in eastern cities.<sup>38</sup> But these depictions also reveal the desire, as Irving put it, to mingle with "absolutely savage life," to imitate and appropriate Indigenous practices in a manner akin to what Shari Huhndorf has called "going native." As Huhndorf has argued, appropriation of "Native images" and "emulation of Native practices" have been central to both "constructing white identities" and "naturalizing the conquest" of North America.<sup>39</sup> Prairie tourism of the sort that Irving would model for later writers like Francis Parkman and Theodore Roosevelt provided eastern white elites with a temporary experience of going native, which almost invariably involved killing and consuming buffalo.

By preparing the bison hump for Paul Hover, Natty performs in *The Prairie* a function similar to that of the professional guides in tourist memoirs like Irving's. Buffalo meals in these accounts take on a ritualistic character, reinforcing the expropriations of colonization through material acts of consumption, and Hover quickly develops a colonizer's hunger for more, announcing only somewhat in jest his plan to kill a buffalo "every day while we are in this place" and promising to "eat them clean . . . even to the hoofs."<sup>40</sup> But if Natty facilitates Hover's experience of indigeneity via the ritual consumption of the prairie's most iconic animal, he also pushes back on Hover's imperial hunger, refusing to be "a witness and a helper to the waste of killing one daily."<sup>41</sup> This refusal captures what is generally taken to be Natty's ecological "worldview," but as Timothy Sweet has observed, though Natty's *personal* hunting and eating practices are restrained and driven by necessity, he has always made his living as a commercial hunter and trapper—professions that make him complicit with the transformations of the biosphere he frequently laments.<sup>42</sup>

In light of this complicity, both Natty's laments and his cookery are redolent of what Renato Rosaldo has called "imperialist nostalgia," through which "agents of colonialism . . . mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed."<sup>43</sup> Writers like Cooper, Bryant, and Irving all participate in this kind of nostalgia, mourning and "longing for" those elements of the prairie ecosystem that settler colonialism was undermining.<sup>44</sup> Like Cooper and Bryant, Irving centers bison and cows in his account of the transformation

already underway in the mid-1830s, reporting on both overhunting and the encroachment of white settlers and their livestock. Irving echoes Natty's concern that the abundance of the prairie breeds in settlers and tourists a "reckless improvidence and wastefulness" amply demonstrated by Irving's own party, which slaughters dozens of animals at a time, leaving behind "great morsels of roasted venison and buffalo meat," while "the hides, the horns, the antlers, and bones" were "strewed" around in a "forlorn and desolate" scene.<sup>45</sup> But Irving also follows Bryant in imagining a civilized future marked by the proliferation of cows. So while Irving is pleased to discover buffalo in sufficient numbers to provide his "main subsistence," he nonetheless approvingly notes that "the rich pasturage of the prairies is calculated to sustain herds of cattle as countless as the sands upon the sea shore," and it took "but little stretch of fancy" to imagine a "herd of buffalo" transformed into "so many cattle grazing on the edge of a common."<sup>46</sup>

If the bison remained in the early 1830s a vital element in both Indigenous and settler economies and food systems, Irving's vision of its replacement anticipates what would unfold over the ensuing decades. In his 1849 tourist memoir *The California and Oregon Trail*, Parkman registered "great changes . . . at hand in that region," wrought by "the stream of emigration to Oregon and California"—an imperial current that would ultimately disrupt the entire web of life in the West: "The buffalo will dwindle," Parkman rightly predicts, and "communities who depend on them for support must be broken and scattered."<sup>47</sup> As with Bryant's poem, Parkman's narrative tracks both the bison's disappearance and its replacement with the cow. Though Parkman and his party do encounter many buffalo, a more common sight is what the Sioux apprehended as a "swarm" of white people, "with their oxen and wagons," that had begun to "invade them."<sup>48</sup> While the buffalo is Parkman's primary object of desire, cows are everywhere in the narrative, moving west along with their colonizing humans. As a wagon train of emigrants passes by, Parkman observes "a large drove of cattle following behind," and the last large concentration of animals in the book consists of "hundreds of cattle . . . feeding over the meadows."<sup>49</sup> These livestock accompany a battalion of Mormon soldiers who had enlisted to fight the Mexican War in exchange for federal assistance for their own project of settlement. These settlers and their herds encapsulate the intersecting human and nonhuman dynamics of US imperialism at midcentury; as with the lowing of cows in Bryant's "Prairies," the sounds of livestock management foreshadow its eventual ascendancy, as Parkman and his group are awakened by "the voices of men driving in the cattle [that] sounded all around us."<sup>50</sup>



By the century's end, white settlers and their livestock had thoroughly remade the landscape of the West, and Parkman would note the extent of the "metamorphosis" in the preface to the 1892 edition of *The Oregon Trail*. "The buffalo is gone," Parkman observed, and "tame cattle and fences of barbed wire have supplanted his vast herds and boundless grazing grounds."<sup>51</sup> While Parkman's elegiac tone is typical of the imperialist nostalgia with which white writers reflected on the bison's fate, for Indigenous people of the plains the loss of the buffalo brought both "sore physical discomfort" and "great mental distress."<sup>52</sup> These material and psychological effects corresponded to the inter-related carnal and symbolic roles the bison had played in Indigenous culture. As the ethnological team of Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche recorded in their 1911 report "The Omaha Tribe" (La Flesche was himself Omaha), the dwindling of the bison population undercut Indigenous food security and the ceremonies integral to maintaining it. These ceremonies required "the buffalo for their observance," specifically the fat used for the ritual "Anointing of the Pole."<sup>53</sup> The pole symbolized a man "who was both a provider for and protector of his people," and the anointing of the symbolic man with bison flesh acknowledges what Audra Mitchell describes as "co-constitutive relationships between Indigenous communities, other life forms and ecosystems that have enabled their collaborative survival."<sup>54</sup>

The US settler enterprise replaced the multispecies relations of the prairie with those of the cattle ranch, and it is unsurprising that the emergent beef industry quickly targeted Indigenous populations as a market. As Winona LaDuke has observed, "Feeding those whom the government had deprived of food . . . became a major business," developing later into a "federal commodity program" that ironically distributed to Native people an array of canned meats derived from "livestock raised on Native lands." Such programs perpetuated what LaDuke calls an "intergenerational distortion of subsistence, and its replacement with industrialized dependency," and the physical and social effects of this distortion and replacement were already felt by those Fletcher and La Flesche surveyed.<sup>55</sup> In a pragmatic if darkly ironic attempt to revive what had been lost by the 1870s, the Omaha appealed to the US government to deliver funds owed to the tribe for ceded lands, in order to purchase cows as a substitute for the ceremonial bison. The cows were slaughtered and their flesh employed for the anointing of the pole, but this ceremony with "beef as a substitute for buffalo" was to no avail. After a few failed attempts, the Omaha knew "that the food on which their fathers had depended and which through past centuries had never faded, had been destroyed."<sup>56</sup>



By contrast with Fletcher and La Flesche's report on the physical and mental distress of Indigenous people resulting from the bison's displacement by the cow, Frederick Jackson Turner's "Significance of the Frontier in American History" figured that displacement as fundamental to American progress. Like Bryant in "The Prairies," Turner folds the eradication of indigenous "forms of being" into a narrative of national becoming, inviting his readers to imaginatively survey "the procession of civilization, marching single file" across the country: "the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer."<sup>57</sup> For Turner, the bison blazes the trail for the course of empire and capital, as "the buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and thus became the trader's 'trace'; the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads."<sup>58</sup> In blazing this trail, the bison is not merely the casualty of civilizational advance but a valuable contributor to it. Turner thus closes a century of settler colonial violence by once more appropriating the "Indian" and the bison for a story of American progress contingent on their disappearance.

### The Bison as a Dish

Across the nineteenth-century genres of romantic poetry, tourist memoir, and exceptionalist historiography, the bison appeared as either inevitable casualty of or willing participant in a civilizing process and a national story—and in every case such figurations obscured the material operations of empire and capital that were in fact responsible for the devastation of the species. Though Bryant's speaker imagines himself "alone" on the prairie, by the 1830s the American Fur Company was already established throughout the American West, exporting tens of thousands of buffalo robes every year.<sup>59</sup> In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the bison also provided a food source for trappers and others in the fur trade, and this remained true for increasing numbers of white settlers moving west, as well as for laborers on the expanding network of railroads.<sup>60</sup> But if these commercial and imperial developments were already pressuring bison populations in the antebellum period, in the decades following the Civil War an ever-expanding market for robes and leather—facilitated by the newly constructed railroads—would turn the "vast plain," which had once "teemed with animal life," into what the army officer Richard Dodge described as "a dead, solitary, putrid desert," as "myriads of buffalo" were transformed into "myriads of carcasses."<sup>61</sup>

William Cronon has likened the industrial-scale killing to the operation of a "slaughterhouse," though here the primary product of the slaughterhouse—the

meat of the slaughtered animal—was of little value to the hunters, and “the loin, the ribs, the hump, all the best and most savoury parts of the animal” were “left to rot where it fell.”<sup>62</sup> But while the edible flesh went to waste, the by-products of slaughter—as they would in the industrial meatpacking plants of Chicago—provided a secondary opportunity for capitalization.<sup>63</sup> By the 1880s, with the species driven to the edge of extinction, the landscape was littered with bones, which could be sold and processed into fine bone china, bone ash fertilizer, or bone char for sugar refining.<sup>64</sup> The bone business was of a piece with the trade in robes and leather, elements of an animal economy determined to transform every trace of biotic material into market value.

By contrast with this material rendering, the conservationist George Bird Grinnell offered an alternative use for these remnants of a dying species. “On the floor,” Grinnell wrote in 1892, “on either side of my fireplace, lie two buffalo skulls . . . white and weathered, the horns cracked and bleached by the snows and frosts, and the rains and heats of many winters and summers.”<sup>65</sup> While these decorative skulls provide a reminder of the bison’s tragic role in the historical narrative of US national development, Grinnell’s act of preservation allows the bones to “take life before [his] eyes,” an imaginative reanimation that would characterize an emergent *ecological* narrative of the bison, one that informed early conservation efforts and continues to inform environmentalist thinking today.<sup>66</sup> Whereas Turner’s essay situates the loss of the buffalo within a national history figured as a natural process, Grinnell’s gestures toward recuperating a natural order disrupted by that national history.

Grinnell was a prominent figure not only in documenting the bison’s demise in the wild but also in early efforts to preserve the species. Beginning with a captive herd at what would become the Bronx Zoo, conservationists were able to reintroduce bison onto expropriated land across the great plains.<sup>67</sup> The descendants of these herds can be viewed today at tourist destinations like Yellowstone National Park, and in recent years bison have been reintroduced in greater numbers onto tribal lands.<sup>68</sup> But while this conservation program has been celebrated as a success, the better part of the bison’s recovery has resulted not from its protection but from its production. Though the idea of conservation is associated with the symbolic spaces of national parks and tribal lands, the bison’s survival remains largely contingent on the operation of the slaughterhouse. The vast majority of bison are raised for slaughter and consumption, and even those in national parks are subject to periodic “culling,” a management practice geared less to the health of bison herds than to that of neighboring cattle populations. Most notably, ranchers adjacent to Yellowstone have claimed that bison carry the infectious bacterium *Brucella*

*abortus*, which can cause pregnant cows to abort their fetuses.<sup>69</sup> These ranchers consider the bison a biological threat to beef cattle, despite the fact that transmission of brucellosis from bison to cows has never been documented. The threat of contagion has been exaggerated to justify a management protocol that subordinates conservation to the interests of the cattle industry, and the lives of supposedly protected bison to those of cows destined for slaughter.<sup>70</sup>

The ongoing privileging of the ranched cow over the Yellowstone bison, along with the bison's dual status as endangered species and edible meat, strikingly illustrates the "tangle of biopolitical relations" Shukin identifies at the heart of animal capital, but this tangle also reveals what we might call a biopolitics of extinction, a system of valuation that "lets die"—in Michel Foucault's terms—entire ecosystems and innumerable species in order to "make live" both symbolic populations of charismatic animals like the bison and, more significantly, the hundreds of millions of cows and other livestock that increasingly dominate the landscapes and food cultures of the United States and the world.<sup>71</sup> That livestock now accounts for around 14.5 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions and contributes substantially to deforestation, habitat destruction, and what many scientists now believe is the sixth mass extinction in the history of life.<sup>72</sup> In light of these impacts, it becomes apparent that perhaps the only species not immediately threatened by human activities are those cultivated for human consumption; thus it makes a kind of ironic sense when Eugenia Bone concludes, in an article for a lifestyle magazine on the thriving business of buffalo meat, that "when it comes to the buffalo, we have to eat it to save it."<sup>73</sup> This is the same theory to which John Calvelli, as spokesperson for the Wildlife Conservation Society, adhered when he suggested that the Bison Legacy Act would let us feel "more patriotic when we eat a bison burger."<sup>74</sup> Here Calvelli essentially reiterates the marketing rhetoric of bison purveyors like Epic Provisions and Ted's Montana Grill—media mogul Ted Turner's national chain of bison restaurants—which claims to have been "conceived" not only to advance "the values of the Great American West" but also "to save the species from extinction."<sup>75</sup> Taken together, the statements of the environmental executive and the corporate restaurant reveal a shared willingness to conflate species preservation and meat production under the banner of national pride.

Though these examples are couched in the rhetoric of contemporary consumer culture, the notion that to save the bison we should eat it can be traced back to the earliest attempts at conserving the species. In the same article in which he laments the bison's eradication, Grinnell lays out a hypothetical preservation program focused on the buffalo's potential value as livestock.

In alignment with other initiatives “being carried on by the Agricultural Department for the Government,” Grinnell suggests the establishment of “an experimental farm for buffalo breeding and crossing,” which would not only preserve and increase the “stock of pure buffalo” but might also produce a “new race” of hybridized “buffalo cattle”—all of which, Grinnell imagines, “might be of great value to the cattle growers of our western country.”<sup>76</sup> A few years earlier, William Temple Hornaday had similarly speculated that cattle herds would benefit from interbreeding with bison, which would “introduce a strain of hardy native blood” that would render the cows more resilient to the often-punishing conditions of the prairie.<sup>77</sup> This discourse of blood and genetics foreshadows the selective breeding and genetic modification that would eventually characterize industrial food production, but it also reflects the white supremacist roots of American conservationism. Beyond Theodore Roosevelt, who openly admitted that “the extermination of the buffalo was the only way of solving the Indian question,” and who viewed American imperialism as part of a larger “race expansion,” the conservation movement included the notorious eugenicist Madison Grant, who served as both chairman of the New York Zoological Society and director of the American Eugenics Society.<sup>78</sup> Like Roosevelt, Grant’s idea of conservation was tied to big game hunting, which he viewed, as the historian Miles Powell has put it, as a way for white men “to ward off the degenerative effects of urbanization and industrialization,” and thus to preserve the racial supremacy underpinning national and imperial rule.<sup>79</sup>

If the introduction of “hardy native blood” would “improve the character” of living herds, it would also improve return on investment by enhancing the flavor of their meat. As the pioneering bison rancher and hybrid breeder C. J. Jones argued in 1888, whatever the hybridized animal might lose in quantity it would gain in quality. For “who,” Jones asked, among those who had eaten “a cut from the hump or sirloin of a fat buffalo cow in the fall of the year,” would not “make affidavit that it was the best meat he ever ate?”<sup>80</sup> Hornaday also celebrated the buffalo’s “hump meat,” “cut in slices and fried in batter, *a la cowboy*,” as “a dish fit for the gods,” but “in general terms” he noted that the buffalo “differs in no way whatever from domestic beef.”<sup>81</sup> And it is the latter sense of equivalence and fungibility that really informs this less familiar aspect of his conservation strategy, which emphasizes not the bison’s charismatic status as wildlife to be protected but its similarity to beef as a food to be consumed.

Given the centrality of consumption to both the nineteenth-century origins and twenty-first-century manifestations of bison conservation, the Legacy Act seems less representative of the real mechanism of its survival than does the menu for President Obama’s second inaugural luncheon in 2013, which

featured a main course of hickory-grilled bison with a wild huckleberry reduction. As Senator Chuck Schumer, the Inaugural Ceremonies Committee Chair, noted in a press release, the menu hearkened back to “the birth of our nation” by incorporating “foods that the first Americans enjoyed.”<sup>82</sup> This emphasis on a historical Americanness that effortlessly elides any distinction between colonial and Indigenous histories not only anticipates official responses to the Bison Legacy Act but also aligns with the marketing language of a contemporary food culture that features the bison as an emblem of authenticity, sustainability, and national values. The inaugural luncheon might well have been catered by Ted’s Montana Grill, where “ingredients like simplicity, honesty and authenticity” come together to provide both “classic American dishes” and a total “experience founded on the ideals that have made our country great” while supporting an environmental agenda that keeps “sustainability at the core of Ted’s menu.”<sup>83</sup> Epic Provisions likewise relies on a convergence of American imperialist nostalgia with a rhetoric of sustainability, perhaps most notably in the 2016 announcement, timed to capitalize on the Bison Legacy Act, of the company’s rollout of a new grass-fed “Bison Tallow.” Echoing the claims of congressional representatives and environmental executives, Epic “proudly” presented the tallow as a “cooking oil coveted by early pioneers and indigenous cultures throughout the history of our country,” and drawn from what is now the “national mammal of America.”<sup>84</sup>

By conflating white colonizers and Indigenous people, consolidating the histories of both in a jar of cooking fat distilled from the bodies of American buffalo, Epic’s promotional tallow epitomizes the two forms of “rendering” Shukin has identified as the pillars of animal capital: the “carnal” processing of animal bodies into commodities and the figurative transformation of the animal into a national symbol. The marketing language of Epic and the other purveyors taps into both the historical and the ecological narratives of the bison, positioning their products as reflections of “the history of our country” while also suggesting that bison ranching will “positively impact grasslands, enrich soil health, sequester carbon, and increase biodiversity in our world.”<sup>85</sup> Here both the historical and the ecological claims are equally problematic: the former enlist the bison as an emblem for a settler colonial project that was responsible for its near eradication, and the latter advance its survival as evidence of a national ecological sensibility, giving a veneer of sustainability to the American enterprise in general and its unsustainable food culture in particular. Compounding these problems, Epic also appeals to consumers through the biological rhetoric of the “Paleo Diet,” which bypasses Indigenous antecedents—and thus the history of colonialism altogether—in favor of identifying a way of eating that is supposedly natural to the human as a species.

And Epic's simultaneous appropriation and erasure of Indigenous culture in its production and marketing—clearly trafficking in Native imagery and food culture while framing its products as drawn from “the whole foods consumed by our human ancestors”—replicates its questionable claims to originality in its company history.<sup>86</sup> Though Epic's white founders say they have created “the world's first 100% grass fed meat, fruit, and nut bar,” Native American Natural Foods (NANF), an Oglala Lakota-owned business, introduced the Tanka Bar several years earlier; and as NANF explains in its own marketing materials, the Tanka bar is a replication of *wasna*, a mix of dried berries and buffalo meat that Lakota have eaten for generations.<sup>87</sup>

Just as Epic obscures the Lakota origins of both its product and its business model, what goes missing more broadly in the claims of companies like Epic and Ted's—claims to both authenticity and sustainability—are the geopolitical violence of colonization and its ongoing ecological repercussions. And just as its near extinction was central to the genocidal course of continental settlement, the national mammal is now implicated in yet another imperial project of eradication, this time on a planetary scale. The story here really is this: if the cow effectively replaced the bison in the American landscape, the bison has now survived by becoming just another cow, folded into a system of animal agriculture and meat production and consumption that has spread the world over—a system that, in the name of feeding the world, now quite seriously threatens to destroy it.

### Some Other Order of Things

As both the Legacy Act and companies like Epic and Ted's make clear, the bison remains a vital source of both symbolic and carnal capital in the US consumer economy. But given the potentially catastrophic impacts of that economy, a more fitting rendering of the bison's meaning in the context of our present ecological emergency is Kent Monkman's *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, a multimedia installation that initially showed at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto in 2015, and was later acquired by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. Monkman is a Canadian artist of Cree ancestry, whose work across his career has engaged ironically with the visual counterpart to the American literary tradition I have delineated, most notably in an array of paintings critically revising the works of artists like Catlin and Bierstadt. Monkman's painting *Death of Adonis* (2009), for example, revises both Greek myth and Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo* (1888), with white horsemen replacing Native hunters in the scene of a buffalo hunt (figs. 2, 3). Whereas Bierstadt's original is entirely devoid of white people, giving the impression that the last of the buffalo and





**Figure 2.**  
Kent Monkman, *Death of Adonis*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 72 inches × 120 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 3.**  
Albert Bierstadt, *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art.

the last remnants of an Indigenous human culture are mutually fading away as part of the inexorable unfolding of history, Monkman figures whites as both aggressors against indigenous forms of life and victims of their own hubristic aggression. Monkman's white hunters are gored by bison and shoot one another in the heat of the chase, while a white figure in the foreground—the Adonis of the title—lies dead among the bison skulls littering the ground.

*The Rise and Fall of Civilization* extends this critique of American romantic painting to the genres of modernist primitivism and the natural history diorama (fig. 4). Part of the installation is a herd of cattle painted on the walls, invoking both Picasso's bulls and the cave paintings of Lascaux that inspired him. The cattle circle the room in a stampede, eventually overtaking and intermingling with a herd of bison, the flattened images of which also recall Native American pictographs: the "red bison / painted in their own blood" that Hogan evokes in her poem "The History of Red." For Hogan, these images document "some other order of things," before "this yielding land" was "turned inside out / by a country of hunters / with iron, flint, and fire."<sup>88</sup> *Rise and Fall* seems almost to literalize this turning "inside out," as the bulls herd the bison around the gallery space until the latter erupt from the back wall into the three-dimensional form of the diorama.

The diorama features two taxidermied buffalo standing on a bluff, flanking the human figure of the artist's Two-Spirit or "gender-fluid alter ego," Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who gestures forward over the edge of the cliff, where a third buffalo—this one a cubist sculpture fashioned out of metal rods and cowhides—is suspended in the air.<sup>89</sup> The diorama re-creates a buffalo jump, a bluff over which Indigenous hunters would drive herds of bison, and the installation as a whole could be read as a critical allegory of settler colonialism, with the invasive European cattle driving the native bison over the precipice of extinction. On the floor beneath that precipice is a pile of shattered bone china, representing both the scattered bones of bison left on the prairie and the products—themselves signs of white wealth and "civilization"—rendered from them. These scattered remains constitute the wreckage of what Hogan calls, in her poem "Return: Buffalo," "the straight, unhealed / line of history."<sup>90</sup> Like Monkman's circular installation, Hogan's buffalo challenges the linearity of that history in the very fact of its return, "like a prophet . . . / with a vision / too unholy to tell." And like Hogan's buffalo, the figures in Monkman's diorama seem to bear witness to the apocalyptic outcome to which the civilizational project had been heading all along. But even as that apocalypse unfolds, both Miss Chief and the taxidermied bison remain safely on the bluff, while it is





**Figure 4.** Kent Monkman, *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, 2015, mixed media installation. Collection of Glenbow Museum. Photo of the installation at the Gardiner Museum by Jimmy Limit. Image courtesy of the artist.

the fabricated cubist rendering of a buffalo—made not only *in* the appropriate idiom of modernism but *of* the skins of colonizing cows—that hurtles to its destruction. If, as scholars like Tasha Hubbard, Kyle Powys Whyte,

and Audra Mitchell have argued, the settler colonial project has always been both genocidal and ecocidal, Miss Chief here seems to indicate—gesturing toward the sculpted bison’s *suicidal* trajectory—that the empire always in the end undermines itself. The leaping bison, assimilated to a settler aesthetic and literally hybridized—like Grinnell’s and Hornaday’s fantasies of commercial breeding—with the material remnants of the cattle that have overrun it, is thus less a figure of the tragic “vanishing” of Native cultures than a symbol of the fundamental unsustainability of the imperial enterprise.

By honoring the bison with commemorative legislation and placing it on the menu of green consumer choices, the US government and corporate environmentalism effectively replicate the primary operations of both settler colonialism and animal capital, rendering the indigenous animal “internal” to the nation while obscuring the material violence of that nation’s business as usual. In the nineteenth century, that business involved the eradication of the bison in the interests of capital accumulation and territorial conquest, while

in the twenty-first it means the enlistment of the remnants of the species in the “greenwashing” of a meat industry and food culture that now present an existential threat to the biosphere as a whole.<sup>91</sup> By contrast, Monkman’s hybrid bison, leaping onto the pile of shattered bones, registers the violence of five hundred years of what Whyte calls “industrial settler campaigns” that have rendered North America a “dystopia” for its Indigenous people, and that now generate apocalyptic fears of ecological catastrophe within those industrial settler societies that have caused it; but at the same time, Monkman’s taxidermied buffalo reemerging from the narrative of history painted on the walls might be read as the kind of “return” Hogan prophesies in her poem, the realization of what the “ghost dancers heard / in their dream / of bringing buffalo down from the sky.”<sup>92</sup> Hogan’s poems and Monkman’s installation situate the rise and fall of what Roosevelt called “white civilization in the West” in the deeper contexts of evolutionary and even cosmic time, offering a reminder that those five centuries constitute—as Whyte has noted—only the “tiniest sliver” of a much longer human and nonhuman history, and signaling the possibility of some alternative and recuperative future beyond that civilization’s fall.<sup>93</sup>

But what, under conditions of planetary ecological emergency, would that future look like? Nick Estes describes the “Ghost Dance,” which emerged as a ceremonial practice in the wake of the genocidal violence and the eradication of the bison at the close of the nineteenth century, as a “revolutionary” invocation of an “anticolonial Indigenous future free from the death world brought on by settler invasion.”<sup>94</sup> The realization of the ghost dancer’s dream would thus be decolonization in the form Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang have described, which “requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.”<sup>95</sup> With respect to the bison, this would mean neither the expansion of federally protected lands and herds nor the green capitalism embodied by Epic Provisions and Ted’s Montana Grill but the establishment of “an actual buffalo commons” as LaDuke has imagined it: “that vision of the Ghost Dance being actualized on the land by the people and their relatives who live there.”<sup>96</sup> This kind of decolonization would be, in Tuck and Yang’s terms, material rather than metaphorical, requiring—especially in light of the nonnegotiable demands of a warming planet—not only the dissolution of the colonial relation between settler and Indigenous nations but also the dismantling of what LaDuke calls the “cattle and beef empires” that displaced the bison and disrupted its ecosystem in the first place.<sup>97</sup>

Those empires of animal capital have spread across the Americas and around the world, and humans and livestock now account for 96 percent of all the mammals on earth.<sup>98</sup> In the United States alone, there are around a hundred

million cows at any given time, over three times the number of bison at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thirty million bison in a decolonized commons would have a carbon footprint of their own, but it would pale in comparison to that of the one billion cows that currently constitute the worldwide empire of meat, and even “middle-of-the-road” estimates of the changes necessary to avoid catastrophic global warming suggest the near-immediate “phase out of livestock emissions.”<sup>99</sup> Just as Indigenous-led resistance to petroleum infrastructure has highlighted the necessity of decolonization to decarbonization, the bison’s enlistment in the interrelated projects of ecological nationalism and “sustainable” meat production suggests that conservation without decolonization—conservation that fails to “resist,” as Whyte has put it, “the capitalist-colonialist ‘matrix’” of which the cattle industry is a predominant feature—may do as much to drive extinction as it does to prevent it.<sup>100</sup>

## Notes

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