

*Tatanka Awicagli na Mahpiya Ile Win:*

An Intergenerational Story of Buffalo Restoration and Lakota Futures

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deserves to be heard: thank you for being my chosen family and lifting me up. You all inspire me, and you make me feel so loved.

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acknowledge the memories and ideas we share and the ways they are formative to my understanding of what this work means to me, and meant to us. I acknowledge the contributions that you, too, made to this work in your 18 years, and the ways in which your life, your passing, and your continued love encourage and inspire me to keep going. And last but certainly not least, to my *ate* specifically, whose life work and stories are the basis of this thesis: words will never describe what it means to me to be trusted to share your stories and to do this work by your side. It is my greatest pride and honor being your daughter.

My community and family mean everything to me, and this thesis is a labor of love that would not be possible without you all.

*Pilamayape.*

Foreword:

*I sit at the kitchen table smiling as Ate and I hunch over steaming bowls of wahanpi. He's on his second bowl, and I know more stories and belly laughs are coming. My spoon swirls the wastunkala we dried this summer, and I remember being mesmerized by his hands shucking kernels after many long, hot days. I think about the hours I spent watching those Buffalo this summer and everything they taught me. A tinpsila bobs to the top and I giggle thinking about how long it took to dig them from the side-hills, just for my dad to braid their roots with the swiftness of inherited knowledge. Each bite tastes like memories made, lessons learned, and a deep sense of accomplishment -everything coming from my homelands, my family's hands, and my people's knowledge. My dad tastes it too. I feel free. I feel full.*

When I am home, eating soup and the foods of my people and our land with my family, I reflect on the ways in which my relationship to Buffalo has evolved over time. I know we share in the pride of a labor of ancestral love and colonial resistance - food sovereignty in action. The wahanpi teaches me that nourishment is so much more than lean meat, proper calories, and micronutrients, and it's the stories of my life that allow me to listen.

~

*On Tatanka Awicagli na Mahpiya Ile Win*

I chose to include my dad and I's Lakota names in the title of this thesis to reflect, in *Lakotiyapi*, the deeply intergenerational themes to unfold in the chapters to come. In English, *Tatanka Awicagli* and *Mahpiya Ile Win* translate roughly to "He Who Brings the Buffalo Back" and "Blazing Cloud Woman," respectively. My dad received his name from a, now passed, widely respected Lakota elder in acknowledgement of his contributions to our people, as is our way. I received my name in 2021 after the devastating death of my younger brother led my family to engage more deeply and intentionally with our ceremonial and spiritual practices from an elder in my community who has embraced my family into his Sundance *hocoka*. My name is

that of my four times great-grandmother, the daughter of Dakota chief *Wambdi Okicize* (War Eagle). My family assumes the name is referring to the clouds at sunset (or perhaps sunrise), as her sister's name was Dawn. In a later section, I share my dad's association of sunrises and sunsets with his Grandma Laura, granddaughter of *Mahpiya Ile Win*. My English name is that of my maternal grandmother Elsie, Laura's daughter. It wasn't until after writing this thesis, with the intention to include an intergenerational aspect with the stories of my dad, his grandmother, and myself, that I realized and was able to reflect on how the names I have inherited come with an abundance of intergenerational wisdom and love that continually reveal themselves to me. This nuanced layer of the intergenerational in and of itself captures something so not only beautiful and meaningful to me personally, but integral to this work. Something so rich it feels wrong to try to dissect and articulate. With that, I decided to pay homage to the way these names have instilled this work in my life both before and since my birth by incorporating them in the naming of the work itself, and letting the power of these names infuse and unfold in the pages to come.

### *On Heartache and Healing*<sup>1</sup>

While the story is too long and the magnitude of its impact too great to write here, it is important to me that I articulate with transparency, at least in part, some of the very real ways in which my experiences of grief and healing have informed and influenced my perspectives on Buffalo restoration and health. First is the role ideas of food sovereignty as it relates to Buffalo restoration aided in my eating disorder recovery. I struggled deeply with anorexia and orthorexia starting in 2017 and around 2.5 years ago made the first significant strides in my recovery that have allowed me to reclaim my health. Mainstream wellness culture rooted in white supremacy

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<sup>1</sup> Content warning: discussion of an eating disorder and experience of loss to suicide.

and fatphobia distanced me from the relationship to food that is my birthright as a Lakota woman, and I was actively rejecting the privileged, blessing of access I had to my ancestral foods, like Buffalo meat, to shrink myself and my worth. My ED recovery journey is complex, but I can recall numerous instances of taking a bite of Buffalo soup at home or a spoonful of *wojapi* at someone's graduation party and noting how much I longed for the happiness I felt in those moments; I felt “healthier” in those moments than I ever did after starving myself of nutrients, memories, and community. Slowly, with much help from therapists and my family, I began to question my comfort as an emerging advocate for Indigenous food sovereignty with allowing Western diet culture to control my Indigenous body in this way. I wholeheartedly believe if it weren't for my relationship to the Buffalo and the values and purpose they instilled in me, that my recovery journey would be vastly and direly different. My eating disorder experience allowed me to further connect the dots between Buffalo restoration, my mental and physical health, and food sovereignty.

The other experience I'll discuss is the grief I have experienced since losing my little brother, Beau, to suicide on November 19, 2020. My own mental health hit a rock-bottom when I became deeply depressed during the first year after his passing, but again, through time in therapy and with my family and the Buffalo, I began to heal. The depth of my heartache created a depth of understanding I didn't have before. The newfound depth to me has allowed me to think through my brother's pain, how settler colonial violence affected him, how the dialogues of hope were intangible during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial strife following the murder of George Floyd, how this intangibility failed him, how the Buffalo held me and gave me space to reflect and heal, and how all of these things together define my visceral understanding of the urgency and necessity of Buffalo restoration for Lakota people and Lakota health. It is

with these experiences that reside in my and my family's bodies and minds that I approach this thesis in an attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the dialogue of Buffalo restoration - for my brother, for myself, and for my people.

*To the Pte Oyate*

*To my community, the Wakpa Waste Lakol oyate*

*To all those ancestors and elders who have worked and sacrificed to maintain our relationship to the Buffalo,*

*To the generations of Lakotas to come,*

*To my ate, my inspiration and hero forever,*

*And to misunla in the stars,*

*I humbly dedicate this thesis to you.*

## Introduction

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The history of Buffalo restoration in the so-called United States is fraught with much trial and tribulation, white savior-esque environmentalism, and colonial disempowerment of Indigenous peoples whose histories are rich in their relationships to the Buffalo. Despite the omnipresent attempts of control from colonial institutions, Native peoples have managed to maintain and cultivate our unique relationships to the Buffalo through various modes of cultural revitalization and food sovereignty for Indigenous social and environmental justice. Many Native-led efforts and contributions across Indian Country sustain this important work, and with deep gratitude and admiration, I applaud those involved who have committed themselves to their peoples, to the Buffalo, and to the ongoing fight against settler colonial violence. I reject narratives that fail to center our resistance, love, brilliance, and joy in favor of a deficit narrative. Still, we exist within a socio-political context that operates on our continued dispossession, oppression, and erasure, and many of these efforts of Buffalo restoration, too, are subjected to the same manifestations of systemic colonial violence that we are as Indigenous bodies, individuals, families, communities, and nations. In my albeit short 22 years of life thus far as a Lakota, Nueta, and Hidatsa woman raised on the Cheyenne River Reservation, I have witnessed first-hand the complexities of Buffalo restoration as it relates to tribal, state, and federal politics. I've also witnessed first-hand, like most all Lakotas on Cheyenne River have, the consequences of this political nightmare and the ways in which it minimizes our potential, our values, and our future both figuratively and literally.

Trying to operate within the frameworks of palatable “decolonization” as defined by settler colonial ideology prevents us from enacting large-scale, meaningful change in our communities, and I argue that this same issue plagues current efforts of Buffalo restoration - on

Cheyenne River and beyond. What could Buffalo restoration look like if we ground it in the values, ideologies, and needs of our people rather than the colonial narratives imposed on us? What could happen if we operate at the dynamic intersections of health *and* wellness *and* Buffalo *and* land *and* food *and* culture *and* tradition *and* sovereignty as *we* know them to be instead of within the Western confines of compartmentalized “economic development,” “environmentalism,” or even “public health”? What could happen if we allow ourselves to see these “radical” ideas as possible, even tangible? This thesis seeks to approach these questions through 1) a contextual, socio-historical analysis of Buffalo restoration for Lakota people generally and on Cheyenne River specifically, 2) my dad’s stories of his life and of Buffalo, 3) a conceptual consideration of hope and what defines health. My hope for this thesis is that it can contribute to a conceptual framework of Buffalo restoration as it relates to holistic Lakota public health for the Cheyenne River Reservation and beyond.

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## Methods

*“From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.”*

– Linda Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012)

It is of utmost importance that I acknowledge the methods of this thesis and my positionality as a student in Western academia. It is my humble intention as, before anything else a Native woman, to reject the Western standard of “research” in all capacities I am able to, as I am well aware of the violence the word connotes for Indigenous peoples across the globe. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Maori scholar Linda Tihuwai Smith acknowledges and condemns the ways in which research has been weaponized as a tool of colonialism. I refuse to contribute to the violent body of literature that extracts and exploits the knowledges of Indigenous peoples such as my own, and more, I refuse to water down the beauty, richness, and brilliance of my peoples’ knowledges and articulations to fit within the limited confines of Western academic research. I have approached this thesis with the intention to combat the ways research has harmed Native communities in the past and instead offer my best attempt at producing a meaningful, relevant, and productive piece of work for my people.

Smith’s critiques go beyond the outright weaponization of research and discuss the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge bases and ideology writing

It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. It angers us when practices linked to the last century, and the centuries before that, are still employed to deny the validity of indigenous peoples’ claim to existence, to land and territories, to the

right of self-determination, to the survival of our languages and forms of cultural knowledge, to our natural resources and systems for living within our environments.

It is this truth and my personal experiences that have grounded this thesis from its conception and my goal to center narratives of my family - in our voices - in ways meaningful to us.

### *On Life Story*

The use of life story as a methodology has been widely used in socio-cultural research spaces, with several approaches and opinions being demonstrated across several fields, primarily anthropology and psychology (Peacock and Holland 1993). Peacock and Holland frame a major divide as being methods that focus on life and reality over story or narrative - the “life-focused approach” - and methods that focus more on the narrative itself - the “story-focused approach” (369-370). In my own use of life-story as a Native woman, I suppose I don’t know how to disentangle the two, nor do I necessarily believe that I need to, as I don’t see intergenerational, Indigenous life stories as something to be dissected and compartmentalized in order to become credible, valid, and/or valued as method. In many Indigenous cultures, life story has always been a credible, valid, and valued methodology and pedagogy as a subsector of storytelling and oral tradition more broadly. When I posit ideas about what I think could or should be done for Buffalo restoration on Cheyenne River and relay my dad’s thoughts, all of our prior experiences and lessons learned - including those inherited from generation to generation, shared, and independent - are infused into the words I write. It is with this understanding that I have decided to rely heavily on life story as methodology for this thesis to highlight some of the ways in which my family stories inform my beliefs. As a Lakota woman, I have been taught that one can only speak for themselves. This value is reflected in our language down to verb conjugation, and it’s reflected in the way we continue to speak to each other. “Interviews” with my father and our father-daughter dynamic allowed me to destabilize the standard interview-interviewee hierarchy

in favor of a dynamic that encourages storytelling, oral tradition, and *Lakotiyapi*. Accordingly, I tell my life story and my father's through my own lens so as to speak only for myself. That said, it is my hope and goal, given the nature of Buffalo and this work, that it transcends my personal interests, work, and goals, and those of my father, and can possibly inspire a sense of pride and hope in our Lakota future as Buffalo people - a sense of pride and hope in and for the Buffalo, in and for ourselves.

In much of my academic work thus far, I've struggled deeply in my writing on Buffalo restoration because of the expectation to write from an assertive standpoint that conflicts with my understanding of my position in my community and in the movement of Buffalo restoration as a young Lakota woman. It is thus my intention that in this thesis, the telling of my intergenerational life story creates the contextual and theoretical frameworks that define my understanding of Buffalo restoration on Cheyenne River and reflects my values in honoring my responsibilities and capabilities as a Lakota community member. By telling this story of my dad, I am 1) speaking for myself without unintentionally silencing myself, 2) paying respects to the lineages of knowledge that have shaped my dad and I, 3) acknowledging and honoring the contributions and wisdom of my father to this field, this work, and our people, and 4) I'm respecting my positionality while also honoring that my experience and perspectives have a legitimate, valuable place in the discussion of what Buffalo restoration does and can look like for my reservation and all Lakota people.

To reflect my intentions of centering life-story as a valid, Indigenous-centered method in the structure of this thesis, I decided to keep my dad's stories and the narrative component of this project in a separate chapter. I had considered weaving these stories together with the background context, but quickly felt inauthentic doing so. These stories hold more than any

standard, Western academic work could ever hold and their richness deserves to stand alone. I believe disrupting their voice and flow in an attempt to ‘compliment’ the more ‘academic’ component of this thesis would be to do wrong by the stories, by my dad, and by myself. That said, I have decided to organize the thesis as follows. I begin with a non-comprehensive background section to provide necessary, socio-historical context regarding Lakota peoples’ relationship to Buffalo. In the second chapter, I allow our stories to speak for themselves. Finally, in the third chapter, I give the reader a glimpse into my thought process surrounding the anthropological literature of health as it relates to Buffalo and my dad and I’s motives of hope. When read in its entirety, the structure of this thesis in and of itself reflects both the values I hold as a Lakota woman and the contention that arises when trying to articulate them through the process of Western scholarship.

Cherokee author Thomas King writes, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are,” and when I think about all of the stories that define my life and have painted my imagination, I feel the truth of this statement as a Native woman (2). Oral tradition stories have guided Indigenous peoples of the globe since time immemorial and continue to be a core aspect of Indigenous epistemologies, holding an almost unimaginable wealth of cultural knowledge. Further, Indigenous scholars both in and outside of the academy as well as novelists and other creatives have used storytelling in their works to bring decolonial, Indigenous methodology to the literary and scholarly world. The works of Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon-Silko, Thomas King, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Scott Momaday, Tommy Orange, Eden Robinson, and countless others have brought forth Indigenous stories and ways of telling them to a larger audience, in many ways, revolutionizing the field. Thinking back to King’s statement though, I think the beautiful ‘mundanity’ of their methods, at least from the perspective of a Native person, is the most

revolutionary aspect of their work. In his introduction to *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, Simon Ortiz writes "Today's Native novelists, poets, playwrights, essayists, song-writers, filmwriters, and others are simply continuing a tradition. Personally, I don't know if I ever "decided" to be a writer and poet, but I know I have felt it was important to participate in the act of helping to carry on the expression of a way of life I believed in" (xiv).

To me, this is where Indigenous methodology, like storytelling, becomes a radical act of decolonial scholarship in resistance to Western academia. As Native writers and scholars, we are bringing forth a central tenet of our cultures and selves in one of the most obvious ways to us - standard, common practice within our communities and cultures. The very act of writing in this way, grounded so strongly in cultural norms and authenticity, transcends the oppressive confines of Western thought that aim to limit and dilute Indigenous brilliance. Cree scholar Winona Wheeler writes "A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage" (Wilson 71). I attempt to employ decolonial methodology in the way of centering storytelling. Decolonization is a central goal in this reimagining of Buffalo restoration for a healthful Lakota futurism - on all levels and planes that include and go beyond those involving formal academic research, as this is more than that, a labor of love for my community, my people, our ancestors, and the Pte Oyate.

### *On Intentional Narratives*

Since I was a little girl, I've loved listening to the stories of my dad's life. Sitting in complete awe, I'd listen with wonder and pride, heartbroken and inspired by all he's overcome and the person he is in spite of it all. Of course much of this wonder and pride, especially as a

child was sourced from wild Buffalo stories - stories that ranged from near death experiences chasing them through the pasture to heartfelt recollections of words *his* elders shared with him to telling off congressmen in D.C. to receiving a Newsweek American Achievement Award. My dad was my greatest sense of pride as a little girl bringing him in to talk to my fourth grade class, and at 22 years old he still is. While arguably not many years have passed between now and then, I've done a lot of growing up in this time and my understanding of my dad and my relationship to him have grown too. The glimmer in my eyes when I talk about my dad is no longer one solely of childish admiration. The glimmer now, too, reflects the hauntings of shared, intergenerational pain, as I've lived enough life to suffer too and to appreciate my dad's life, accomplishments, and joy within a violent context. The coming discussions of my dad's life and my own describe manifestations of the onslaught of harsh realities he especially (and myself less so) has faced as a Lakota person. Eve Tuck reminds us that "the practice of damage-centered research, in which researchers set about proving how individuals, tribes, schools, and communities have been impacted by deprivation, trauma, and loss... operate within colonial theories of power and change" (13). Telling these stories is not to center trauma or a victim narrative through exploitative interviewing. Rather, I tell these stories of my dad's life as a daughter, as a recipient of intergenerational trauma *and* courage, to acknowledge the formative role these experiences have played in the shaping of my dad's - and thus my own- role in and understanding of Buffalo restoration.

I value the conceptual framework of Indigenous historical trauma (IHT) as described by Lakota researcher Maria Yellowhorse Braveheart, the ways it has provided terminology to discuss the complexity of Indigenous mental health, and the ways it has made space for Indigenous mental health research(ers) to move forward in meaningful ways of developing

intervention. In a later section, I draw on the concept of IHT to discuss the aftermath of the near eradication of Buffalo. Gros Ventre psychologist Joseph Gone recognizes this work too, but sees a danger of it becoming an offshoot of Western “therapy culture” that, citing Furedi (2004), creates a “permanent consciousness of vulnerability.” (Gone 8). Instead, he suggests the emergence of a modern day coup tale, in a way that abandons violence and warfare association, as a way to counter a deficit narrative. The coup tale framework as it could relate to Buffalo restoration is a topic too complex and lengthy to be discussed here; however, it is important to consider here that there are different perspectives on how to best recognize the realities of historical trauma, including frameworks that center “survivance” (Vizenor, 1999) and resistance as opposed to fragility and chronic adversity (Gone 2021).

### *Final Notes*

Our stories of trauma and pain cannot be told without those of love and joy, and of resistance and perseverance. The stories to come are both painful and beautiful, and it is these stories that make Buffalo restoration an embodied life experience for my family: for my dad, my mom, myself, my ancestors, and my beloved brother in the stars. It is my hope that the telling of my dad’s life story as part of my own can both exemplify and embody the value of the passage of intergenerational knowledge in my life, and how our experiences and subsequent perspectives contribute to a dynamic lineage of knowledge that continues to inform how we contextualize and understand our relationship to Buffalo as Lakota people today. By sharing formative experiences through transparent and authentic storytelling, I aim to bring forth the value base behind my personal conceptualization of Buffalo restoration, the forces that have been acting on my life long before I was born, and every second since.

## Chapter One: Background & Context<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I will provide the historical, cultural, and socio-political context needed to understand the cultural significance of the Buffalo to Lakota people. It will describe Buffalo behaviors and relationship to land past and present, the historical near eradication of the Buffalo and the ongoing impacts it has had on our people, Buffalo restoration efforts specific to Cheyenne River, and a discussion of historical trauma. With this context along and the stories in this chapter, I aim to help the reader situate themselves within the urgency of Buffalo restoration so they can understand 1) the depth of my familial relationship to Buffalo and 2) the potential for Buffalo restoration has as a public health intervention for our people, particularly Lakota youth on Cheyenne River.

### *Relationship to the Pte Oyate*

To convey the magnitude of the significance of *Ptehcaka* to Lakota culture through any sort of essay, without witness to them, their power, and sacredness is impossible, especially in the English language. Many of our creation stories tell of the *Pte Oyate* emerging from *Wasun Niya* in *Wizipa/He Sapa* and becoming the *Lakol Oyate* on the surface of *Unci Maka*. It is these creation stories, as well as other oral tradition stories told *since* our creation that set the premise for the things our culture values most. Buffalo - in so many ways - are absolutely one of these things.

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<sup>2</sup> This section on the cultural significance of Buffalo to the Lakota people is an updated and edited version of my essay “Healing a Nation: Analyzing the Cultural and Historical Relationships Between Lakota People, Buffalo, Economics, and Historical Trauma” written in 2019 for Dr. Delphine Red Shirt in her Introduction to Native American History class.

The significance of the Buffalo to the Lakota people extends far beyond the functional uses of their bodies that Western historians have illustrated in textbooks. Though it's a consistently discussed aspect of Native American history, or rather what Western society has decided Native American history is, what's included about Buffalo is often a simultaneously romanticized and discounted hunter-hunted narrative, their significance to Plains tribes, including Lakota tribes, de-relationized and only relayed in part. It is common for American history to define Buffalo as a primary food source and Native Americans as people who made sure to utilize every single piece of the Buffalo; textbooks describe Buffalo robes, bone tools, horn ladles, tanned hides, and other practical uses of the Buffalo with a mindset that assumes every aspect of their significance can and must be objectified within a capitalistic lens of utility. However, Lakota culture is not one of capitalistic, materialistic nature. To the Lakota people, Buffalo were and continue to be much more than an object of utility or sustenance. They are a core tenant of our culture and being in relationship to them is integral to our identity. They mean everything to us, and have always meant everything to us.

When discussing the significance of Buffalo to Lakotas, it is important to note how our culture positions people and other living things in relation to each other and this Earth. In regard to Buffalo specifically, Edward Valandra explains "there is the Lakotas' understanding of the bison as people" (Williams 11). In his book *Spirit and Reason*, Vine Deloria Jr. discusses the "observations on the intelligence and knowledge of [the Buffalo]" speakers had at a meeting of the Intertribal Bison Cooperative<sup>3</sup> (ITBC), which he says affirmed oral tradition that had been

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<sup>3</sup> ITBC was founded from my dad's idea and initiative to gather Buffalo tribes together in a collective effort of Buffalo restoration and was officially established in 1992. He served as the first President for many years and then stepped down into the role of Executive Director in the early 2000s. ITBC currently operates in a vastly different way than when it was founded, and I (and my dad) are *not* in complete alignment with their goals and operations. The specific complexities are beyond the scope of this section and thesis, but I would like to be clear that the

passed down for over 120 years; he observes that ITBC "...confirmed the ancient understanding that these creatures are more like humans in their behavior than they are like other animals if you know how to interpret their behavior" (38). This understanding is reflected in our sacred creation story described in part above, in which Lakota people first entered this world as Buffalo emerging from Wind Cave in the Black Hills. Recognizing that Lakota people lived amongst Buffalo in this way, where human and Buffalo were siblings, is essential to understanding the depths and other aspects of the profound relationship between the Buffalo and the Lakota people. A fundamental principle and prayer in Lakota culture, *mitakuye oyasin*, can be translated to "all my Relations" or "we are all related". This principle defines, amongst other aspects of Lakota culture, a deep and true kinship-oriented respect extended to plants, animals, and other beings. Respect is a theme to be discussed extensively throughout the rest of this thesis, but here we see that the great care people took to never take more than what was needed, to replace moved Earth so she could grow again, and to pray in gratitude for an animal who gave its life so that the people could live are all examples of true respect that reflect the belief that no one being deserved any less than another, and we are indeed all related.

Distilling a people's relationship to food as merely consumption-based neglects the extremely deep and complex cultural and spiritual involvement that underlies a true understanding of all that food means. A very special bond exists between Lakota people and the Buffalo, one that embodies an interconnected cycle of generosity, gratitude, and respect as it relates to food. Eating a diet of primarily Buffalo establishes an incredible connection between spirit, body, and Buffalo. Williams remarks, "The adage, 'You are what you eat' was never more applicable than in the symbiotic relationship between the bison and the Plains Indian" (10).

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ITBC being referenced here is very different from the ITBC (now Intertribal Buffalo Council) functioning today.

Considering our Creation stories, this relationship inherently transcends typical characterizations of food as an “other” to be consumed, as food being linked to conceptualizations of self and community establishes factors of accountability and gratitude that both gives rise to and reinforces a world view of balance, equity, and respect; this world view and relationship to food is thus inextricably linked to relationship to land/water/other beings and issues of sovereignty, justice, and health.

Buffalo play a key role in the prairie ecosystem, extending their significance to other foods, to the land, and to another sacred connection, that between Lakota people and the Earth. One such example of the Buffalo and Earth’s harmony is the Buffalo’s relationship with the wild sunflower. As Buffalo wander through sunflower patches, their hides pick up and distribute seeds over great distances – facilitating the extremely important ecological process of seed dispersion (Deloria 37). Their wallows pack soil providing habitat otherwise nonexistent for other wildlife including amphibians, who rely on the wallows to catch limited rainfall, and their grazing habits facilitate the livelihoods of prairie grasses, prairie dogs, and several bird species (World Wildlife Fund). This being just a few small yet crucial ways the Buffalo contribute to the health of the prairie ecosystem sheds light on ways in which the Buffalo’s significance comes full-circle and is prevalent in all aspects of life.

Another cultural influence of Buffalo behavior is seen in the nomadic lifestyle of Lakota people. The colonial explanations of the nomadic lifestyle in history textbooks again minimize this behavior, falsely attributing a solely materialistic dependency. However, elders, like Joseph Marshall III grandparents, approach the question from a Lakota perspective with the understanding that cultural relationships between man, Buffalo, and the rest of the natural world must be considered when explaining historical migration patterns. Relaying a conversation he

had with his grandparents, Marshall writes, “‘Why,’ I can recall asking my grandparents, ‘did the people move around so much?’ ‘Because everything else did,’ was always the reply” (176).

Examining this idea more closely, one will find that the Lakota mirroring of Buffalo migration patterns becomes as specific as the seasons. In the spring, after a winter together in the large camp, family bands would separate and migrate until late summer or early fall when they would meet again for the annual Sundance (Williams 3). This can be directly mapped onto the seasonal migration of Buffalo, who would separate into smaller herds in the spring and reunite around the same time as the Sundance (Williams 3). The seemingly “new” and important information that is revealed in the stories and experiences of elders is simply the delayed impact of a decolonized, historical truth. Oral tradition, which emphasizes cultural aspects like the unique relationship with Buffalo, is oftentimes the only way certain aspects of Lakota culture can be or has been preserved. That being said, it is of the utmost importance to the complete restoration of Lakota culture that American history recognize and accept the traditional, cultural knowledge and significance of Buffalo.

Although the connections between the two are practically endless, the magnitude of any individual connection between Lakota culture and Buffalo is enough in and of itself to concretize an understanding of the significance of Buffalo in Lakota culture. Still, and magnificently, no part is complete without the other, and the Buffalo’s significance is more than the sum of these incredibly deep individual connections. However, today, neither the Buffalo nor the Lakota people are complete. Through efforts of Buffalo restoration of the last few decades, the relationship between the Lakota and Buffalo has begun to heal after a nearly successful attempt of complete obliteration. Unfortunately, American history and the United States government’s continued disregard for the full recognition of the spiritual and cultural significance of Buffalo

makes these efforts futile. It has led to the under-prioritized status of Buffalo in modern society, which has in turn created a gap in non-Native understanding of Lakota culture and history and a new dimension of historical trauma that prevents Lakota people from being able to fully heal and exist completely as the Pte Oyate. In 1903, in his last public address to the Oglala Lakota people, Red Cloud said, "...the bison must have their country and the Lakota must have the bison..." (Williams 10). We have heard from our elders, and we can see it today; until the Buffalo are fully restored, both physically and culturally, the issues plaguing Lakota people today— disease, suicide, alcoholism, poverty, etc. — will persist, because Lakota people cannot exist without the Buffalo.

Joseph Marshall III (Sicangu Lakota) mentions in *The Dance House: Stories from Rosebud* that the sacred treatment of Buffalo highlights the Lakota virtues of gratitude and generosity, showing that these virtues themselves are among the Buffalo's many contributions to Lakota culture. Buffalo taught and continue to teach our people many valuable lessons about how to live a meaningful, balanced, and healthful life. From their nature as a very giving animal to the social construct within the herd, the Buffalo's esteemed sacredness cast them as role models, and Lakota people made examples of their ways of life. Marshall writes, "The Buffalo cultures were more than indigenous man's material dependence on the Buffalo. But because he was grateful for all that the Buffalo provided, he gave the Buffalo the only thing he could: respect" (180). Williams elaborates on this idea, writing, "Indian people modeled the bison's generosity and the value of 'giving' became fundamental to the economy of the Indian" (9). The generosity that the Buffalo have taught Lakota people has been passed down through the centuries and remains palpable today. Generosity is demonstrated in the example of the "giveaway" at different gatherings where one or one's family will give away star quilts, blankets,

and other items to others as a way of honoring them and giving thanks, and is also demonstrated in the everyday lives of Lakota people today, fundamental in our pursuits of being good relatives.

Moving forward, describing Buffalo as social beings helps in drawing the clear connections between the social constructs of Buffalo herds and the Lakota people. Someone unfamiliar with Buffalo or those who haven't had the opportunity to truly observe Buffalo as they are might think a herd structure is simply each animal acting independently while sticking close to the herd, perhaps making room for general and oversimplified concepts of mother/offspring and male/female dynamics. However, when observation is approached with the understanding that Buffalo too are very cultural beings, it is clear this is not the case, and that Buffalo have very strong relationships with each other and participate in a beautifully complex herd dynamic. Their observed behaviors come down to the familial nature of Buffalo. Understanding this nature allows for a deeper understanding of Lakota social construct, as one need not look further than the Buffalo herd. Like the Buffalo, the social systems of Lakota people were established to preserve the family and ensure survival, creating a balanced, functional, and sustainable tribal community (Williams 3). As was the case with their generosity, the Buffalo provided Lakota people with a model for an extremely robust and efficient society.

### *Contact, Colonialism, and Economics*

Even proceeding with all these connections in mind, the significance Buffalo hold in Lakota culture cannot be overstated. Their value is applicable to every aspect of the Lakota way of life, each of which is intertwined with the others and creates a beautiful, rich, and complex culture and means of existence. One such example is made of the traditional Lakota economy. Our economy was once centered around and modeled after the Buffalo, congruent with cultural beliefs about the animal's importance and understandings of wealth and community

responsibility. The thoughtfully well-balanced ecological harmony produced by the emphasis of Buffalo in tribal economics resulted in an extremely effective, self-sufficient, non-exploitative and non-extractive economy. Not long ago, in the late 1800s, Manifest Destiny and the European agenda to ‘conquer’ North America lead to an abhorrently destructive act of genocide – the attempted, near eradication of the Buffalo. While the “primary” devastation (i.e. starvation and population decline) is well-documented, the secondary effects, such as the deterioration of Lakota economy, were equally detrimental and yet often overlooked. Understanding such an act and its consequential impact requires the discussion of both history and culture and provides valuable information to be used in addressing historical trauma, Buffalo restoration, and therefore cultural restoration. For now, this section seeks to interpret and analyze the eradication of the Buffalo by focusing on how it has and continues to impact Lakota economy.

To begin, one must situate themselves in the past, in a time and place before European contact and influence. As previously stated, the dependence on Buffalo extends far beyond Buffalo comprising a majority of the Lakota diet and reaches the deepest realms of culture and spirituality. Similarly, the role of Buffalo in the economy of the Lakota extends far beyond the myopic and oppressive definition typically associated with a successful economy under capitalism, which emphasizes the wealth a society accumulates from the production and consumption of goods, always at least to some degree through exploitation and extraction.<sup>4</sup>

Recollection of the interconnectedness between cultural values and the multifaceted significance of the Buffalo explains the complexity of Lakota people’s dependence on the Buffalo and what

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<sup>4</sup> A critique of capitalism is essential to the conversation about Buffalo restoration. While I take this stance and will make direct and indirect references to it in later sections on the cattle industry, my dad’s thoughts on a “paradigm shift,” and imagining a Lakota future, this thesis does not discuss racial capitalism in depth in the way it should, as it is simply beyond the scope of my project. That said, it is a fundamental consideration of mine as I move forward with this work.

that means in terms of tribal economics. Traditional hunting of the Buffalo provided food and materials that allowed Lakota people to thrive without reliance on any other tribes or peoples. It also allowed for efficient and valuable trade with other tribes, which contributed to and enhanced the overarching tribal economy established by the highly functional trade routes across North America. Further, serving as indication that economy and spirituality were not distinctly or even remotely separate, is the fact that the self-sufficiency established by this economy strengthened the relationship between the Lakota Nation and the Buffalo Nation. Buffalo, the heart of Lakota culture, fostered an entirely authentic balance with and connection to the natural world as well as a strong sense of pride within Lakota people, both of which grounded them in their existence and purpose on this Earth.

In grim confirmation of this truth, their utmost significance was apparent to European settlers too, who maliciously targeted the *Pte Oyate* with intentional, near eradication to starve Lakota people (and others) into submission and into colonial systems. But the catastrophic effects of displacing Buffalo from the hearts, minds, and everyday lives of Lakota people has had a deep, nuanced, and resounding impact beyond that of starvation. Severing, though not entirely, our relationship with the Buffalo as Lakota Nations has distanced many from the traditions, ceremonies, values, and lessons the Buffalo have taught us, the abundance of holistic health they have gifted us, as well as our personal connections to them, leaving an absence in our understandings of kinship, the world, and our own selves.

We now move forward to a time post-European contact when the attempted extermination of the Buffalo was in full effect. Many scholars, both historians and ethnographers, Native and non-Native, have described the atrocities of the era of Buffalo eradication. In his dissertation explaining the relationship between Buffalo and the Lakota, James

Garrett (Cheyenne River Lakota) explains that Euro-American Buffalo hunting gained momentum after the depletion of the beaver population within the fur industry and the arrival of Civil War veterans in the Great Plains; Buffalo were being hunted by those on their way West to the goldmines, those hunting for hides, and those killing for pure sport (19). This was by no means hunting. Hunting, from a Lakota perspective in particular, involves above all else respect and fairness (not to mention skill and strategy). An understanding of balance was also essential and resulted in healthy population control and the prevention of over-hunting. By the late nineteenth century, the mindless shooting of Buffalo, often with seemingly endless rounds of ammunition from the advantageous safety of railroad trains, had resulted in the reduction of the Buffalo population from numbers in the tens of millions to less than 500 total individuals (Garrett 23). This devastating circumstance was completely at odds with multiple Lakota values, including what it means to be a hunter, making the term “hunting” unsuitable and offensive, and showing yet another way in which this was so painful for Lakota people. Perhaps most effective in trying to convey the magnitude of the event (and the corresponding results), aside from the infamous photo of the massive pyramid of Buffalo skulls, are the inconceivable actions, policies, and words of military and political leaders of the time. General Philip Sheridan, the same man who viciously stated, “I don't know any good Indians, the only good Indians I know are dead,” used federal funds and his military position to intervene in state attempts to protect Buffalo and is reported to have also said,

“(Buffalo hunters) have done in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indians’ commissary; and it is a well-known fact that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead, if you will; for the sake of a lasting peace, let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated” (Garrett 20).

To westernizers like Sheridan and President Ulysses S. Grant, the Buffalo were seen “as a serious obstruction to the subjugation of Indians and the acquisition of their territorial lands” (Garrett 20). This allowed for what, as a representative from Illinois put it, “civilizing the Indian by starving him to death” (Williams 16). These revelations only begin to put the widespread attitude that accepted and allowed for the continued eradication of the Buffalo into perspective and set the tone of the dark series events that occurred as a result.

Now, we must consider the implications this European objective and mindset had on the complete, harmonious function of the Lakota economy in order to understand the immense impact of Buffalo eradication on Lakota people. First, the effects of this mindset were quickly felt by Lakota people whose sustenance depended on the Buffalo. An unfortunate and yet salient example of Lakota people’s mirroring of the Buffalo is reflected in population decline. As the number of living Buffalo became increasingly small, so did the number of Lakota people. Many figures show this relationship with slight variation, but all clearly show that around the year 1900, both Buffalo and Indigenous populations, once plentiful, were near extinction (Williams 8). Thousands of people died trying to continue to live without their primary source of not only sustenance, but livelihood. Without understanding that decimating a food supply also meant decimating an economy, livelihood, and lifestyle on a physical and spiritual level, it’s easy to draw the line of impact at starvation. However, the impact Lakota people felt and continue to feel is greater still. Bearing in mind the significance that the Buffalo’s role in economy played in every aspect of Lakota life, one can begin to understand that the true devastation of this heinous act is nearly incomprehensible. It makes logical sense that reducing Buffalo nearly to extinction would not only physically deplete a nation of its people, but that it would also destroy Lakota economy, distance Lakota people from their culture, and thus weaken the powerful ties that had

allowed for successful resistance to settler-colonialism and assimilation up until that point. This was, after all, the ultimate goal of Buffalo eradication.

In the decades that followed the mass destruction of both Buffalo and Native peoples' populations and the forced adoption of reservation life, Lakota people did what they could to practice what remained of their culture and rebuild their lives in a whole new world – a world dominated by Eurocentrism, and a world without Buffalo. With no economy and no access to their primary food source, Lakota people were left with no choice but to become dependent on the federal government. While aid was promised, the failure of what little aid was provided is evident in the deterioration of spiritual and physical health of the Lakota people. In an *Indian Country Today* article, Jim Stone (Yankton Sioux) is quoted with, “To force that sedentary lifestyle on somebody who was out living on the adrenaline rush of hunting Buffalo—either on horse or foot—I don’t know if we can fully comprehend what that would feel like. They had been the caretaker of the Buffalo, and suddenly there were no more. From the cultural side, they had failed in their role as humans. I don’t know how I would deal with that” (Jawort). The separation from the land and beings that have defined Lakota culture for millennia resulted in instant feelings of extreme loss and hopelessness. The loss of a Lakota sense of self and purpose combined with the forced shift away from the traditional diet serve as the foundation for the severe mental and physical health crises like depression, alcoholism, and diabetes that Lakota people still experience to this day. Economic health is also still suffering. Since the day our ancestors were forced to “[succumb] to the onslaught of the misplaced philanthropic policy of the United States government” (Means 7), Lakota people have by and large lived in extreme poverty and lacked a stable and efficient economy. These demographics serve as evidence that the effects of Buffalo eradication did not end after the final “agreement” to a “civilized” life.

It is clear from the remarks of Euro-American officials that the eradication of the Buffalo was an intentional attempt to undermine the rich and strong culture of Indigenous peoples like the Lakota. The government's success in identifying the Lakota's dependence on Buffalo provided them with the single tactic that would break the fierce resistance to assimilation. However, without understanding the complex and nuanced nature of this dependence, one would not be able to predict just how catastrophic destroying the Buffalo would be for the generations to come. Recognizing both the historical and cultural significance of the eradication of Buffalo, the role of economics in the situation, and what it has meant for Lakota people is essential in order to engage in a meaningful discussion of how to heal a Nation that has spent decades fighting to survive in the wake of genocide.

#### *Buffalo Restoration and Historical Trauma*

The cultural and historical background information explained thus far provides the necessary understanding to proceed with a discussion of historical trauma. Indigenous historical trauma emerged as terminology in the literature when Dr. Maria Maria Yellowhorse Braveheart published her 2003 article "The Historical Trauma Response Among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration." In this article, she defines historical trauma as the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences" (7). The previous sections demonstrate the eradication of Buffalo as a classic case of historical trauma and historical loss. Further, it is clear from the current state of Lakota people that the devastation surrounding the eradication of Buffalo is still in effect. The modern relationship between Lakota people, Buffalo, and, as is to be discussed briefly later, cattle, presents an entirely unique aspect of historical trauma. When coupled with deep-rooted cultural values and tradition and the historically

problematic attempts of the U.S. government to right their wrongs and “heal” Native peoples, the necessity of Buffalo restoration in the true healing of Lakota people and culture becomes even more clear.

The federal government’s previous attempts to “heal” are perhaps more accurately described as unsuccessful and futile attempts to compensate for generations of devastation. In the words of Cherokee poet and activist Ruth Muskrat Bronson, when good intentions are fueled by “...a vague sense of guilt for the actions of his [the White man’s] forebears in outstanding the original inhabitants of the rich land they adopted and for the long and shameful history of broken treaties with these dispossessed,” there is, “a tendency toward impulsive action based on a desire to make amends” (Brown 202). The contribution of haste and guilt to the ineffectiveness of previous governmental actions is complex and varies greatly. One way this idea is demonstrated is in the implementation of government feeding programs – from the first government rations laid out in treaties, to modern programs like the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that are utilized by many Lakota people today, especially on reservations. These programs, while greatly improved, still operate from the initial foundation of government food rations and fall short in their support for Native communities outside of their bare minimum contributions to food security. The drastic shift from a diet of primarily lean Buffalo meat, other wild game, and supplemental nutritious plants to a diet high in sugar and fat has not only resulted in high rates of diabetes and heart disease; it has resulted in a cultural disconnection from food and from the Buffalo, both of which continue to have catastrophic effects on Lakota people that extend beyond physical health.

Value misalignment and cultural misunderstanding provide an inarguable explanation as to why certain government programs and initiatives have failed to serve Native people. The difference between the cooperative economic nature of Native peoples and the capitalistic economy of the United States federal government has led to the erroneous belief that monetary compensation or seemingly successful integration into the capitalistic society is equivalent to taking measures to heal. However, as I hope is clear at this point, the problems facing Lakota people, while largely to do with the economic situation, are rooted much deeper – at the source of destruction of the Lakota economy and its deeply consequential cultural impacts. Together, these concepts and misunderstandings explain why simply providing money, goods, or services that aren't rooted in culture and tradition hasn't resulted in reparation and never will.

Another compelling argument for the restoration of Buffalo is the introduction of cattle, which to my initial surprise, became one of the ways Lakota people tried to reclaim our ways and heal themselves post-eradication. After the decimation of the Buffalo population and implementation of the United States' reservation policy, as the effects of eradication became increasingly prominent and the ability to hold onto cultural values became increasingly difficult, Lakota people tried to adapt traditional ways to fit the new reality. Perhaps one of the most notable examples is seen in the post-eradication relationship that arose from the scarcity of Buffalo and introduction of cattle.

On the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Oglala Lakota, government-issued steers were used as a replacement in traditional Buffalo hunts in an effort to preserve and continue the traditional hunting practices characteristic of the Lakota (Means 8). At this point in history, the “civilization” of Native peoples and attempted assimilation into white society was in full force. Stockholding was supposedly introduced to Lakota people as a way of establishing a

Euro-American approved and determined state of self-sufficiency. However, as Lakota people tried to incorporate tradition and tribal influence into their livestock practices and the adaptive relationship with cattle began to transform into an opportunity for the tribe to become independent once again, away from the capitalistic economy of the United States, the government intervened. The concept of a rising, successful tribal economy, which functioned on collective rather than individual efforts, was threatening to white ranchers and the chokehold of individual wealth, and action was taken to combat this advancement. Oglala Lakota scholar Jeffrey Means describes this phenomenon, common amongst many Plains tribes as, “The white man’s fear of economic competition” that withheld the Lakota from equal participation in the country’s expansion of capitalism (29). It was after this brief reestablishment of a tribal economy that assimilation efforts were increased and refocused on European farming and agricultural technique. Means explains that in addition to the cessation of the traditional hunting methods, other Oglala techniques used for the care and distribution of stock since 1868, such as communal herds run by an extended family unit, also ended because of governmental intervention; instead, the American method of stock raising, itself derived from a collage of European ranching traditions, replaced the Oglala tribe’s communal method by the turn of the century (Means 9-10).

While raising cattle initially served a greater purpose and presented a potential way to hold onto certain aspects of Lakota culture and identity in the wake of two catastrophic events, it has ultimately morphed into a complex and violent means of assimilation. Means writes, “Unfortunately, the almost mystical, and certainly mythical, image of the independent yeoman farmer as the backbone of a democratic and free nation offered an unyielding blueprint for the assimilation of Native Americans into American society” (29). The repercussions of forced assimilation into Western agriculture continue to harm and inhibit our people today.

The historical trauma surrounding the eradication of Buffalo is two-fold. First, is the “classic case” presented as the direct result of economic destruction and separation from a primary aspect of Lakota culture. The physical loss of Buffalo and land, both of significant cultural value, has left Lakota people emotionally scarred in the ways outlined in the previous sections; decades of living out of touch with the Buffalo and land base that grounded Lakota people in their identity manifests in high rates of depression, suicide, and alcoholism among Lakota people. The trauma also manifests in the health demographics that result from a shift away from the traditional diet and lifestyle that followed the eradication of Buffalo and move to reservations. Coupling the events (i.e. the eradication of Buffalo) that lead to these problems with the emotional impact bound to occur after going from a once thriving, healthy Nation to a people plagued by health disparity and disease makes the link between physical health and historical trauma evident. While historical trauma has only become an established concept in psychology in the last two decades, the link between historical trauma and physical health outcomes is even newer in terms of acceptance in the mainstream medical field.

The second aspect is the *continuation* of this trauma that results from the current separation of Lakota people from the Buffalo. While it is true that the Buffalo population has increased significantly since the late 1800s and many tribes and organizations, including the Oglala and Cheyenne River Sioux Tribes and the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC), have initiated restoration and reestablished Buffalo into their cultures and communities to varying degrees, the modern relationship between Lakota people and Buffalo is not sufficient. Multiple issues are preventing these efforts from being enough. In many instances, the restoration is partial and/or not aligned with the cultural values that define true restoration, as this requires a

shift from agriculture to Buffalo culture, in which Buffalo are not treated like cattle. Buffalo must not be forced to endure the same pains of colonialism Lakota people have.

This leads to another issue - the cattle (and farm) culture that, for the most part, dominates the successful economic sector (in terms of income and financial opportunity) on the two largest reservations in South Dakota, the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge Reservations. Although white intervention certainly sparked the dysfunction of tribal relations to cattle on Pine Ridge and other reservations, the inability of cattle to effectively and simultaneously bring economic success, health, and prosperity to the Lakota people ultimately lies in the fact that cattle are not Buffalo, and a capitalistic economy cannot justly serve our people. Even during the time when cattle were playing an important role in Lakota lives, the cultural significance of Buffalo was upheld, as cattle never infiltrated Lakota religion (Means 16). This seemingly minor observation must not be overlooked. While adopting a capitalistic and cattle-based economy was the lesser of two evils for Lakota people of the time, this new way of life still contradicted the fundamental principles of Lakota culture, and it is no different today. It is still Buffalo in our creation stories that define who we are. The continued separation from Buffalo results in a self-perpetuating cycle of historical trauma that cannot and will not be stopped until the return of the Buffalo. Every day without a fully healed/restored relationship with Buffalo is a day this trauma is being written into the genes of future generations of Lakotas.

Aside from the establishment of tribal herds, much of the focus surrounding the cultural and spiritual healing of Lakota people has been on language reclamation<sup>5</sup>, environmental justice, and food sovereignty. I argue that Buffalo restoration is a pathway for Lakota people to transcend historical trauma, and it is with the recognition that its ability to serve as said pathway is due in

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<sup>5</sup> Professor of sociolinguistics Wesley Leonard of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma argues the term reclamation is more apt than revitalization, positing that the latter further distances Indigenous peoples from our communities' agency and involvement in coming back to our languages.

part to the fact that it encompasses these other modalities. Buffalo have always been central to Lakota culture, and therefore are central to its revitalization. The healing of Lakota people must not be looked at from an “or” perspective; it’s not a question of Buffalo restoration or language reclamation, but Buffalo restoration *for* language reclamation. Many elders have supported efforts to bring back the Buffalo for this very reason. My dad tells stories of an elder who spoke of the songs that would be able to be sung upon the return of the Buffalo. Another explained the importance of Buffalo restoration in her Lakota language class, as the missing piece was no longer missing; people finally had something to talk about.

Buffalo restoration also connects to other methods of cultural healing. A healed relationship with Buffalo would allow for the success and advancement of food sovereignty, as the Lakota food system is simply incomplete without its most traditionally prominent food source. Further, Buffalo are central to the healing of the land and our relationship to it. Buffalo once had a significant role in maintaining the health of the Plains’ prairie ecosystems. After centuries of enduring destructive farming methods, the introduction of non-native species, the overgrazing of cattle, and now the effects of climate change, ecological imbalance has made the land sick. Restoring the Buffalo provides an opportunity to restore balance. Additionally, returning the Buffalo would facilitate the healing of the relationship between Lakota people and their spiritual connection to the Earth and their land base, which contributes, as is to be discussed in Chapter 3, to the historical trauma faced today. Each of these aspects is essential to the complete restoration of Lakota culture and health, and addressing one independent from the others only leads to the undermining of our collective healing and division amongst Lakota people. It is for these reasons that Lakota people must prioritize uniting to support Buffalo restoration as an all-encompassing modality of health.

Achieving a fully restored relationship with Buffalo and all of the co-benefits it would certainly have is much easier said than done. Even tabling financial and land issues that are sure to arise between federal, state, and tribal governments, Native and non-Native farmers and ranchers, and the larger community, a critical obstacle that must be overcome is acceptance from Lakota people themselves. In his book *When Indians Became Cowboys*, Peter Iverson writes, "... while it is true that to this day many Native American tribes maintain their tribal identities, in the process of cultural adaptation they lost their tribal cultures" (Means 5). While I believe that Lakota people carry a strong sense of pride, tradition, and culture in most aspects of modern life, the cattle culture that has evolved for nearly two centuries and established itself among Lakota communities in so many ways has caused the cultural implications of accepting cattle over Buffalo to be forgotten. Whether it be the next or last step towards Buffalo restoration, Lakota people must confront the uncomfortable idea of their own internalized colonialism and make the decision to trust all aspects of their cultural tradition and intuition. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, PhD writes, "Wakiksuyapi, those carrying the historical trauma, can transcend trauma through a collective survivor identity and a commitment to traditionally oriented values and healing" ("Wakiksuyapi" 1). Through the decolonization of the mind and a commitment to the traditional values of our culture, the Buffalo can be restored and historical trauma can be overcome. It is only then, when the relationship between Lakota and Buffalo is healed, that the Lakota people and *Pte Oyate* will be complete once more.

## *Buffalo Restoration on Cheyenne River* <sup>6</sup>

Efforts to bring Buffalo back to our people have ebbed and flowed over time, but in 1993, one of the first large-scale restoration efforts took place on the *Wakpa Waste Oyanke* (Cheyenne River Reservation) in South Dakota. The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (CRST) developed its new Buffalo program, Pte Hca Ka Inc. - a tribal corporation, incorporated by the tribe itself with no federal say-so - as a product of the growing wants, hopes, priorities, and needs of Tribal communities on Cheyenne River to bring Buffalo back to the people. The tribe's previous program was a roughly 75 head herd that, in the words of my dad, a tribal employee who initiated Pte Hca Ka Inc., was a "political football" (DuBray). Pte Hca Ka Inc., on the other hand, was an act rooted in decolonization; it was People-centered, Lakota cultural revitalization through Buffalo restoration. However, in the early 2000s, politics and corruption, or rather "factionalism," internalized colonialism, and "culturalism," caused strife that eventually led to a dissolution of the movement on CRST and relative dormancy of the tribe's Buffalo Program (Mihsuah xv-xvi) . Recent developments of the program, now known as the Cheyenne River Buffalo Company, are deeply concerning on all fronts; from the way decisions about the program were made to the implications of the decisions themselves (including the new name), the program seems to be moving in the direction *opposite* of decolonization, Lakota cultural revitalization, and Nation-building. Should the program continue in this direction, removing Lakota people farther from who we are and are meant to be, both the Lakota people and the

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<sup>6</sup> This section on efforts specific to Cheyenne River is adapted from a previous essay, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Analyzing the Buffalo Program on Cheyenne River with Decolonization Theory," written in Spring 2021 for Dr. Delphine Red Shirt in her class "Discourse of the Colonized." Notable edits include those surrounding the name change as well as the meat processing plant to reflect information that has come forward in my community since writing the original essay. In the future, this section would benefit from a more critical and rigorous consideration of what "decolonization" can or should mean and look like.

Buffalo will suffer. Tribal programming should be focussed on combating the issues our peoples face after violent, forced distancing from our culture by *decreasing* the gap - not increasing it. This section seeks to draw from concepts of decolonization, factionism, culturalism, and empowerment to analyze and contrast the trajectories of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe's past and present Buffalo programs, examine the ways which the program has strayed *away* from a People and Culture-centered act of Lakota empowerment, and discuss the implications this has for Lakota futures.

First, it is important to situate Pte Hca Ka Inc. within the theoretical framework of decolonial empowerment. Decolonization is a complex term with many nuanced definitions that has been overused and misrepresented, generating rightful skepticism among those interested in radical change. For the purpose of this section, at the risk of being lenient, I will use Dakota scholar Waziyatawin Angela Cavender Wilson's conceptualizations, which I do believe can have radical implications when taken to their full potential. Wilson explains, "Decolonization in its farthest extension moves us beyond mere survival and becomes a means of restoring health and prosperity to our people by returning to traditions and ways of life that have been systematically suppressed" (71). After over a century of a non-whole, inaccessible relationship with the Buffalo, this was exactly what Pte Hca Ka Inc. was created to do. The program was a plan to bring cultural and economic health to CRST *in a good way* - in a way that didn't compromise Lakota values because it was guided by and grounded in those same values. Great care and respect was taken in developing the program for the people. For example, my dad explained that the program itself was birthed from conversations with the people in each reservation community, in which their voices were given the chance to be heard. He had gone into the communities, many under-represented at the level of tribal government, asking for input on tribal development and

opinions on some suggestions from other planners as well as a big Buffalo restoration project (as noted later, this act was rare). After the initial apprehension, community members for the most part rejected planner-proposals and spoke of being separated from the land, wanting it to be utilized in a way that would benefit everyone (DuBray). Presumptively, this meant everyone and not solely cattle ranchers with range units. My dad also notes that people mentioned Buffalo-related ideas before he even brought up the restoration idea, and that when he did, people were excited and quick to share ideas and the plethora of ways it would benefit the people (DuBray). Upon the Tribe's approval of the Buffalo project, it was proposed that the program be under a tribal corporation governed by a board with one member from each district. The board was responsible for structuring the corporation, including selecting a name and determining guidelines. Something as seemingly simple as the name of the program carried with it a significance that seems even more obvious now in its absence. The naming of Pte Hca Ka Inc. was a very conscious and intentional act of decolonization. Dad recalls "There was a lively discussion on the naming and much debate took place amongst the elders and Lakota speakers as to what and why it should be named accordingly. The board selected the name based on those debates which further cemented the direction in a culturally appropriate way" (DuBray). Elders and board members were very aware of the importance of language revitalization and the ways in which the language was needed to reach any goals of Buffalo restoration, the ways in which Buffalo are needed to revitalize the language, and how the Buffalo program itself could aid in both. The Lakota word *Ptehcaka* for "Buffalo" is not only most accurate (as opposed to *Tatanka*, which is commonly misused as a generic term for Buffalo, when it's really only referring to Buffalo bulls), but for those not particularly comfortable with the language, the guttural sounds makes it hard to say. My dad says, "that was important." Indeed, this is very significant from a

decolonization standpoint. African scholar Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes, "to write in the language of the colonizers was to pay homage to them, while to write in the languages of Africa was to engage in an anti-imperialist struggle" (Smith 38). The name Pte Hca Ka Inc. was intended to refamiliarize Lakota people with the language, even through one single, once-common word, on a deep level - a word that was hard to say and that was also language tied to a most important facet of our being as Lakota people, which is of course the Buffalo (DuBray). It was these methodologies that established Pte Hca Ka Inc. in a *good way* and from a *good place*, honored and protected the integrity of our kin the Buffalo, and was a means of the restoration and revitalization of many traditional Lakota practices, ceremonies, teaching, and relationships. Albeit short-lived, Pte Hca Ka Inc. was a big step towards decolonization for CRST.

Beyond situating Pte Hca Ka Inc. within the context of decolonization, it was important to highlight some of the ways in which it was developed because doing so exposes the differences in which the current program was developed. Most notably, is the lack of transparency and community consultation, and the program's name. After decades of dormancy, the tribe's Buffalo program has started to come to life again, but not in the way many tribal members, including those involved in the original Buffalo movement on Cheyenne River, would have hoped. The transition from Pte Hca Ka to Cheyenne River Buffalo Company was made by Tribal Council members, who appointed themselves to serve as board members. This new board has made numerous decisions about the Buffalo program without community input or consultation. Most significantly, the program is now known as the Cheyenne River Buffalo Company. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, on the importance of using Indigenous languages, argues that "the language of the colonizer became the means by which the 'mental universe of the colonized' was dominant (Smith 38). Moreover, dad explained that prior to Pte Hca Ka Inc.'s

formation in the '90s, explained that at the time, tribal council and previous tribal planners centered tribal development exclusively as economic development (DuBray). Now, nearly 30 years later, it would appear this is the direction the Cheyenne River Buffalo Company is heading, which puts the program back in a dangerous place.

The Tribe recently purchased an off-reservation meat plant in Mobridge, South Dakota and the Cheyenne River Buffalo Company recently became an official producer with the Indian Agriculture Council. The new Buffalo Company is now shipping and selling Cheyenne River Buffalo meat nationwide, and the meat is also available for purchase at the plant in Mobridge. The company is also working to secure large government contracts with various federal entities. Despite having grass-fed Buffalo meat of the highest quality, raised on the rich native prairie grass of the Cheyenne River Reservation across the road from my family's herd, they have decided to compromise that quality by grain-finishing the Buffalo before processing. To do so, they are further compromising the integrity of the Buffalo and their meat by placing them in an off-reservation feedlot. This circumstance is disheartening on several levels, the first being that the integrity of the relationship between the Tribe and the Buffalo is severely compromised. Second, when we consider the values, beliefs, and medical/nutritional backing that inform why Buffalo deserve to and should be grass-fed, we see a gross misalignment between the Company's goals and those of food sovereignty and Buffalo restoration for Lakota health and wellbeing. Seeing as our people experience the highest rates of diet related health issues, undermining the quality and integrity of the meat and the Buffalo themselves exacerbates these problems and as my dad always says, "adds insult to injury." In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith explains that "Western philosophies and religions place the individual as the basic building block of society. The transition from feudal to capitalist modes of production simply emphasized the role of the

individual,” which situates a predominately economic mindset as colonized (Smith 51). The conflicting ideologies that seem to govern the priorities of the past and present Buffalo programs can be described conceptually as “factionism” and “culturalism,” as defined by Choctaw scholar Devon Mihesuah. She writes, “Tribes have long experienced factionism between those who cling to tradition and those who see change as the route to survival, whether tribal, familial, or personal” (Mihesuah xv). She elaborates further, explaining “Some intratribal factionalism might be termed ‘culturalism,’ a form of oppression that dovetails with racism” (Mihesuah xvi). My dad recounted an example of what could be called culturalism in the time leading up to Pte Hca Ka Inc, in which he says other tribal planners criticized him for seeking community input as it was a “waste of time” (DuBray). This can also be seen from the other side in the response of the community members consulted. My dad said many were apprehensive and distrusting at first, spoke of past failures, and he said, “They overwhelmingly expressed their disbelief that a tribal representative] was actually asking them what they wanted and what ideas they might have for development” (DuBray). This becomes significant once again in considering the lack of community consultation regarding the new direction of Cheyenne River Buffalo Company. Culturalism is an unfortunately common issue for many Native Nations on numerous social levels to varying degrees, and can be particularly damaging when enacted through policy and decisions within and by the tribal government. Mihesuah writes, “Natives in tribal power positions - political, economic, or social - often use expressions of culturalism against those who do not subscribe to their views” (Mihesuah xvi). CRST reviving the Buffalo program as a company with what seems like a solely economic priority and then naming it in English is an unsettling and alarming action arguable considered an act of culturalism as a result of the permeation of colonial discourse into the “mental universe of the colonized” (Smith 38). It’s

important to recognize and point out when culturalism and internalized colonialism is influencing the actions of our leaders not only so that something may be done to address it and stop the perpetuation of harm, but because acknowledging that the ways in which we ourselves have been colonized is in fact just that - a result of colonialism to no fault of our own - is the only way through which healing and meaningful, subsequent, decolonial action can take us forward.

Cree scholar Winona Wheeler writes “A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage” (Wilson 71). The conversation about the problematic establishment of Cheyenne River Buffalo Company as well as its priorities is a conversation that needs to be had, and needs to happen soon. Wheeler adds a call to action as another layer to decolonization writing, “Decolonization is about empowerment - belief that situations can be transformed, a belief and trust in our own peoples’ values and abilities, and a willingness to make change. It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities” (Wilson 71). It’s time once again for the Lakota people to be heard. When this conversation happens, we must remember our responsibility to honor the sacred relationship with our kin the Buffalo that existed far longer than the colonial ideologies that plague our Nation. We must move forward, not backward, in our efforts of decolonization. We must help our leaders heal by holding them accountable, as to decolonize and collectively heal, we must operate from a place of unity, and that unity comes from centering our culture.

## Chapter Two: The Stories of Our Lives

### *Early Years and Grandma Laura*

My dad has told me on several occasions various stories from boarding school ranging from when he got taken to the school, punishments, the atrocities that happened at those sinister places, and even pleasant memories with his friends. I will not go into detail of those stories here, for I do not want to exploit my father's trauma and pain. However, I think it's important to recognize that this experience is part of his embodied reality and thus plays a role in who he is today.

My dad attended Cheyenne Agency boarding school until the damming of the Missouri River flooded the Old Agency and it was moved to Eagle Butte in 1959-1960. At the end of the '64-'65 school year, he was kicked out of the Eagle Butte boarding school and sent to Catholic boarding school at the Immaculate Conception Indian Mission in Stephan, South Dakota on the Crow Creek Reservation, where he spent his one year before being kicked out once again. After the police caught him having tried to drop out, he was sent back to school in Eagle Butte to finish his sophomore year. He was kicked out of the dorms his Junior year, but was able to live with his Aunt Leona and sister Lynn and graduate from Eagle Butte High School in 1968.

I cry every time I think about my dad hiding under his bed as a little boy not wanting to be hauled off to boarding school. I always note the way he defends his grandparents' choice to send him, as we both know it wasn't much of a choice.

*Sometimes, I think about how my grandparents were traumatized by boarding school, but had to send their kids and then grandkids to boarding school knowing full well the difficulties they were going to be subjected to. That had to be heartbreaking for them. I am very grateful that my kids never had to go, but I am sure the scars it left on me has impacted my children as well. (DuBray, "On Boarding School")*

Quill Christie-Peters (Anishnaabeg) painted a piece depicting her traveling back in time to hold her father as a boy before he would enter residential school in Canada.<sup>7</sup> While my dad compares his experience to those of his friends and peers who “had it way worse,” I still see that painting and want to hold my dad and tell him he would be okay, too. To tell him that his trauma doesn’t have to be qualified with me. To tell him that I love that little boy fiercely through space and time, through fear and pain, and through our collective pool of tears. That I would do anything to be able to protect him.

I recall the story of his Grandma Laura’s own experience of being sent to Genoa U.S. Indian Industrial School in Nebraska, a story that has been told to me by several relatives on several occasions. I can picture it vividly: Grandma Laura’s long dark braids cut as punishment for running away, falling to the floor as if they are not an extension of her being; her sneaking out that night again at risk of who knows what type of horrific consequences to rescue her braids from the garbage, frantically digging up the cold, wet earth to bury those braids under the protection of the tree she’d retrieve them from upon her parents’ next visit in a team and wagon. She sent those braids home and carried them til the day she died at 102 years old. I imagine her fear and bravery often when I braid my own hair, and it warms me in a bittersweet way to think of how beautiful I must be in her eyes. I think back to my dad’s big, rough hands fumbling my thick, curly hair as a little girl and the neat braid I’ve always been amazed he was able to pull off. I wonder if he thought about Grandma Laura then, and if he thinks of her now, the way I do, when he tells me my hair is beautiful.

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<sup>7</sup> *Kwe time travels to hold her beautiful brown father under a blanket of stars, whispers he is worthy and loved and they brace for the storm.* Acrylic on canvas. 3ft x 4ft.

Having lost his mother, my namesake, at age three to a car accident and his father at seven to exposure, my dad was raised by his grandparents Laura and Tony Rivers, who had already raised his older twin brothers Leroy and Elroy from birth. It took him until adulthood to realize it, but he now knows that Grandma Laura recognized the difficult dynamic my dad would find himself in as the “newcomer” to the household and, as grandmas do, she did everything she could to protect him from it and raise him right. I’d say it’s safe to say she did; after all he’s been through, my dad remains soft, and I know his grandparents are in large part to thank. As Lakota people, our lives and experiences are heavily shaped by the values we are taught from others and their experiences. It’s important to me that in discussing the life story of myself and my dad that I pay homage to Grandma Laura specifically as the matriarch she was and acknowledge the ways she continues to influence the values, thought processes, and actions of my dad and I.

The older I get and the more I learn about my culture, the more I recognize just how much Lakota values of generosity, respect, knowledge, and even humor have already, consciously and unconsciously, shaped me as a young woman. Moreover, as I ask my dad questions about his childhood, I begin to piece together how *he* was shaped by our values. With every story he tells me about Grandma Laura, I see her and her knowledge reflected in him more and more. My dad’s relationship to Grandma Laura comforts the protective anxiety and anger my body holds for him after hearing some of the realities of his childhood, which so deeply contrast my own experiences. I feel emotional and proud thinking of the ferocious grandmother’s love she wrapped my dad, her family, and her community in then, and in knowing that I am embraced by that same love three generations later.

Dad recalls her generosity and sense of humor, carrying on about how powerful of a force of good she was. He tells of the time someone stole from them and the amazement he still feels

thinking about her calm and genuine response: “Poor things. It’s OK. They must’ve really needed it.” He beams as he tells of the time she ran for Tribal council in her 60s, and how she received every single vote in the district - including that of her opponent. His face softens and his eyes twinkle as he tells of the “laughing song” that she’d sing to cheer up her grandsons and lighten a heavy mood, and he giggles remembering her meowing from the back-seat of the car after my dad warned to check under the hoot, convincing her cat-loving daughter and my Auntie Lynn there were kittens to rescue. I imagine rooms full of laughter listening to her laughing song and the mischievous look in her eye after pulling a fast one on her family, and I think about the medicine that humor has offered my people. My dad has always taught me the value of a strong sense of humor from a cultural standpoint, and I’ve seen it reflected this way in my community, in other Native spaces I’ve navigated, and in the way my dad carries himself and lives his life. Learning to see humor and laughter as culture and medicine has helped me through my darkest times, too. I think about how laughter offers a lightness that counters the heaviest of the burdens we carry. I think about my dad joking about his boarding school nightmares; the jokes I made with my friends and brother Beau during my eating disorder recovery; the way Beau started his suicide note to me with an inside joke that gifted me laughter through the tears I cried as I read with a broken heart. I’m inspired by my ancestors, my family, and my people who continue to use humor and laughter as medicine. I’m grateful to the ancestors who taught us to laugh.

My dad told me humor is one of the things Grandma Laura embodied that he admired most, alongside respect, and that has stuck with him his whole life. And how he believes her sense of humor is what carried her through a lot of tough times, and him too. His demeanor brightens when talking about her laugh in the same way mine does when I hear *his*. I ask him what makes him think of her, and he tells me:

*Pretty much every evening, when I see the sunset, I think about her because she loved the sunsets and she'd look for the beautiful sunset every single day. And sunrise, both of them. And that was really a big thing to her. And that's something that she must have conveyed in me because it's pretty big deal for me too, to see them. And every time I see them, the more beautiful they are, the more beautiful a person I realized she was and, and so I think about her every single morning, every single evening when it's sunset and sunrise like that. And because they were really special to her. She used to say, "we have the most beautiful sunrises and sunsets in the world," she said, and I don't know how she knew that, because she didn't travel all over the world, but, but that's what she'd say all the time. And I so, I think that that, and I think she's right, I think I've been a lot of places, and I've never seen any more beautiful sunsets than here. So, you know, I think that I'm sure there's a lot of places have some comparable ones, maybe, but I don't know about any better ones. Because it can be really beautiful. And then, you know, like Northern Lights, different, all those kinds of things - just the beauty in the sky - she just loved that stuff. The stars at night, she'd go out and look at the stars and talk about them, just fascinated with the stars. And, and so I do the same thing. When I see those, I think of her. And when I, you know, when I see people do...good things for people. And it makes me think of her. And so when I do something good, and I feel proud of myself for helping somebody, or being generous or being kind, you know, I think of her because I realize that's where that came from. And she somehow conveyed that to me, then. And so I, you know, I feel good about it. And I and I, that carries with me all the time. And I try to do more of it, because it makes me feel good, makes me proud of her and realize that, you know, I am to some extent able to carry on some of the good things that she possessed and passed on to me. So those are the kinds of things and I think I'm very respectful about nature and about the natural world. And about, uh, I respect people that respect me back. And I respect things that, and I think that's the way it's supposed to be. And I take it a step further, you know, and I realized that, you know, a lot of things and I guess that's why I think so strongly about Buffalo and wolves and things like that, because I've been around them. And I know that they respect me, because I respect them. And if you don't respect them, they'll take you out. Just like that. They got no qualms about doing that. And that I really respect and I appreciate that kind of thing. And I think that's the way it's supposed to be. And, and I think that that's what's lacking in our world today is that lack of respect for each other, for the natural world, for the animals, all our relatives, everybody, everywhere. I mean, I think that's probably the most important thing that she taught me was respect. And, and I have that. I have that for the things that are most important I think. And so I am really grateful for that. And when I see things happening and I see respect taking place no matter where it might be, that makes me think of her. Because that's where my respect came from. (DuBray, "On Grandma Laura")*

The stories, his laugh, *her* laugh, and the sky all serving as reminders that pain is but one thing generations pass down.

### *On Respect*

Respect - *Waohola*- as emulated by Grandma Laura is one of the core values of Lakota culture and is inextricable from many of the others, including *Wacantognaka* (generosity), *Unsiiciyapi* (humility), *Wowausila* (compassion), etc. Respect and these other virtues inform a worldview and a way of carrying oneself that centers kinship and relationality. These values place us human beings right alongside and in community with all other beings on *Unci Maka* as part of an ecosystem. My dad says

*I think the western concept of ecosystem puts humans at the top, and takes them out of the ecosystem, and puts them in a management situation where their job is to manage all these things in this ecosystem. But they take themselves out of it. And so I think that the primary thing from a cultural standpoint is not taking ourselves out of it, but realizing that we're part of that ecosystem. And we play just as important a role as the rest of all the relatives in that ecosystem. (DuBray, "Indigenous Knowledge")*

His 35 years of experience with Buffalo have reinforced the value of respect in his daily life both in and outside of a relationship to the Buffalo themselves. In most every conversation we've had about Buffalo since I was a little girl, respect is always the upshot and my main takeaway. My dad has talked a lot about his firm belief that Native peoples have ancestral knowledge built into them, and that oppressive systems and assimilative policies have not erased these ways of knowing from our peoples altogether but rather created a sort of "dormancy." He calls it - as many do - "Indigenous Knowledge." This idea is not unique, though it's something many Native people come to understand through individual and/or community experiences, independent of

exposure through empowerment media or literature.<sup>8</sup> My dad has employed this school of thought to soothe my self doubt and to reignite my hope at times when the bleakness of personal and world affairs overwhelmed my optimism. As I sat with this lesson that has become a sort of mantra for me in recent years, I began to think about how exactly he came to believe in and understand this concept. Did an elder reassure him during a dark time? Did he unconsciously dispel his own doubt? Did he watch or talk to someone else who did, or perhaps read about it in a book? This actually came up when I asked him to reflect on how the Buffalo have reinforced the value of respect his grandparents ingrained in him. He said “I’ll tell you one of my favorite stories that was a real profound experience for me, if you have the time to listen.” And then, he told me a story of Buffalo and wolves, and of an unforgettable moment in which he felt connected to them, to the land, and to himself like never before:

*...But one of my ideas as I was trying to restore Buffalo back to, to the reservation was that I had hoped that we could restore wolves too, because they kind of went hand in hand. And wolves were one of the primary predators of Buffalo that helped keep the herds healthy and stuff. So I thought that would be a pretty good combination. And anyway, one day I had these wolves - well, I had a couple wolves - but I had this male wolf who acted like he wanted to chase these Buffalo one day. And so I thought, I should just let him go, because I don't think he can hurt the Buffalo and I don't think the Buffalo will be able to hurt him. But I wasn't sure, but the more I thought about it, and he really wanted to go and do that. And so I thought why not, you know, just let him do it and see what happens. So I did, and these were all young Buffalo. And so I raised these Buffalo from - they were born here. And the wolves also. I got the wolves as little pups and so I raised them too. And so I knew that they'd never been around each other before. But I thought that they could grow up together and they, you know, eventually, they could run wild together. And that was my hope and my dream.*

*So anyway, when I let this wolf go, and he started chasing these Buffalo, he took after one little bull. And these were like yearlings that were around there. And the little*

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<sup>8</sup> Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday describes what he calls “blood memory” in many of his works. Simply put, he describes it as “the capacity to remember things beyond our own corporeal existence” (Palmer “Blood Memory” 00:30-00:37).

*bull just didn't run, he just turned around and was ready to fight. And so the wolf was perplexed with that he didn't know what to do. So he thought, "well, maybe I'll try a different one." So he goes to get a different one. And they all do the same thing. So he did that with several of them, and they all just wouldn't run. They just wanted to fight. So I, you know, I knew these wolves really good. And so...he'd look at me and I could tell he was just wondering what's going on - "he's supposed to run when I chased them, and why aren't they running." I could see that was what was going through his mind. And he didn't know what to do. So then pretty soon, he thought, "well, I'll just, maybe I can get them all running at the same time." And so he'd go from one to the other just really fast as he could and trying to get them all, all fired up and get them moving and create some chaos. And that didn't work either. Instead, one of them kind of signaled to the rest of them. And they all came. And it was about 100 head of them. And then all of them came and they formed a semicircle around us. And when they did that, the wolf came over to me. And he wanted me to help him because he was getting scared. And, and I was, uh, I was getting a little bit scared, because I didn't know what they were doing. So I was kind of backing up a little bit towards the fence and wasn't sure what they were going to do. And you know, I noticed that he was sticking right by my side boy - he wasn't moving. And, and then the Buffalo they came right up formed a perfect semi circle around us. And then about 10 or 12 of them came out of the middle. And they came up a little bit closer about - they were probably about 20 feet from us. And so this formation was really, really something to see because it was perfect formation. I had never seen anything like that before. And I had no idea what they were doing. And then uh, neither did the wolf. But he was pretty scared. And then all of a sudden, I noticed I looked down at him and his hair was standing straight up. Every hair on him was just standing straight out. And so he was totally freaked out. And then I noticed when I noticed that I began to realize that the hair on the back of my neck was doing that. Standing up. You could feel it a tingle. And I wasn't sure why, I wasn't sure what, what was going on for sure. But I could hear these Buffalo breathing. These Buffalo breathe really hard and heavy all the time. And when it's cold, you can see their breath going out like that, and that's how heavy they just naturally breathe.*

*And so anyway, I wasn't quite sure what was going on that was causing this, our hair to stand up like that. But this just kept getting louder and louder - this noise. And then all of a sudden, I realized what it was was these Buffalo breathing. And as they were breathing, they were - all of them - were getting into unison. And, you know, one more, one more, one more, they just started getting into perfect sync with the leaders - almost like a drum group. And that's the way they do when they start singing, you got your lead singer, and then he starts singing and then the other ones kind of start singing and they all harmonize and get in harmony with the, with that lead singer. And it takes a little bit but...that's the way they, they start out. So I started seeing that. And then I realized that*

*this breathing just kept getting louder and louder and louder. And all of a sudden it just sounded like one big giant Buffalo standing there just breathing. And it was awesome. And the moment that they all got in sync like that wolf just just flopped over on his side. And submitted. I mean, that's what wolves do is when they, when they give up or they give in to something, they submit and show their stomach. And that's what he did.*

*And it was at that moment that I realized that, you know, these young wolves, young Buffalo had never been around each other, but they automatically knew and they were communicating with each other. That was their way of communicating. And I got to observe that and of course I've got a little bit of that in myself too so I realized that I got to be part of that. And so that's when I first made that phrase of Indigenous knowledge being the same as animal instinct, because I knew that these Buffalo had never been around each other, but they were able to communicate and realize - and that wolf didn't want nothing to do with that Buffalo anymore. I mean, he wasn't wanting to chase him, he was done. And it was all over. And so the Buffalo let him know that he didn't, he couldn't be doing that. And he understood it, I understood it, and it was really a really a profound experience, one of the most profound experiences of my life really. But it was right then when I fully realized that that's what, what I witnessed, and observed and was part of, and then I began to look for it in other situations and, and realized and even started talking about it that way, too...And so I started talking about it, I started going to, you know, schools and classrooms and even telling kids, you know, here on the reservation, about that story, and, and they would just be glued to that story. And, and they realize that I said, "you know, you guys have this in your DNA, you have it in your genes. That's this Indigenous knowledge, because you grew up here, and you're part of this land, and you're a natural part of it. And same as the wolves, same as the Buffalo, same as all the things evolved here for 1000s and 1000s of years. You're part of this ecosystem. And so it's built into all of those relatives, that Indigenous knowledge." And the more that I thought about it and talked about it, the more I began to see it in other, other situations. To anyway... make a long story short, that's how it all started. (DuBray, "Indigenous Knowledge")*

My dad told me this story and in real time changed the way I understood "Indigenous Knowledge" - especially in relation to other beings, instinct, intuition, and an intrinsic sense of respect. He got me thinking about what it means to be part of an ecosystem, an extended community, as a Lakota person. Something that means a lot to me about my dad's work with Buffalo and what he has learned and values from elders and the Buffalo themselves is honoring the Buffalo's integrity, which is of course a manifestation of respect. As previously discussed,

one of the most formative pieces of community elder wisdom that shaped my dad's efforts with the Tribe's herd was the idea that before any ideas get off the ground, we need to ask the Buffalo if they want to come back. My dad describing this aspect of his work has stuck with me from the moment he first told me. I am consistently humbled and touched by this wisdom, and yet disappointed by how something so simple and so truly, deeply Lakota is seen as something so profound, a "novel" methodology. Not disappointment in a way that diminishes the beauty and sophistication of a world view centering respect, kin, and reciprocity, but in a way that reflects how I am saddened that this isn't the default.

My dad tells me countless stories of how when a Buffalo gets hurt, others gauge the situation and do what's best for the herd, and unless circumstances arise that necessitate otherwise, what's ultimately best for the herd is to be together and complete. He retells the story of a special moment he and my mom witnessed years before I was born:

*Your mom and I were, I think I had come in for lunch, and we're sitting in the house having lunch... and we're looking out the window and Buffalo were all right out there just a little ways. And so they've been hanging around there for a while, you know, just kind of watching them and eating lunch and all sudden they decided to leave and started going and here there was one calf that wasn't going and I said 'geez looks like something's wrong with that calf' and it's mom would come back and try to get it to go and it didn't want to go and then we could see its leg was broke. It was completely broke just dangling like that and so then I was gonna go down and, and the whole herd was gone now, but the cow was trying to leave with the rest of the bunch. And Buffalo are real social, so they don't like to be by themselves. So she's wanting to go with the, with the herd. But her little calf is not going so she runs back to get it and try to get it to follow. So it tries to follow, but it's got the broken leg. So it goes a couple of steps and it can't go and stops. And she'd go in and she sees it's not comin. So she's torn between leaving the calf and going out to herd or coming back, staying with the calf. And you could tell she was really wanting to go but she didn't want to leave her calf either. She was trying to get it to go and couldn't get it to, couldn't keep it going, so finally she just decided to leave it. 'Okay, you're not gonna go I guess you're on your own.' So she left and she went with the herd.*

*So then I thought, Well, I told your mom, 'I better go down and see what, if I can help it or what I can do, I don't know, I can't just, I mean it ain't gonna make it like that.' So I was gonna go down and see for sure if its leg's broke or what, maybe bring it back*

*and try to put a cast on it or something, I didn't know what I was gonna do. But I just getting ready to go down there and here, all of a sudden we, and the Buffalo had gone about a mile away by then, And here, all of a sudden, a bunch of bulls came running back - about 10 and 12 of em. And they come in on a dead run, just kicking up a cloud of dust. And I thought 'what the heck are they doing?' Here, they come right up to that calf and got all around it. And then they started -that calf was laying down on its side flat on its side - and then a couple of them got on each side of it. And they actually put their horns underneath it and picked it up and got it and helped it up. And then it got up and stood and one of them behind it kind of pushing it along. And other ones are kind of holding it up like that and were taking it. And they took it for a ways like that. And so the little calf was trying to go and was working out. And then all of a sudden, it just gave up and couldn't do it anymore. And it just flopped over on its side. And it wouldn't even try to get up. They kept trying to get it to get up again and it wouldn't. Its legs were just limping and wouldn't even try. And so when they saw that, then all of a sudden, just like that they just turned on it. And they just start jumping up and down on it and and they just stomped it to death. And then they took off on a dead run back to the herd again.*

*And so we sat there just then we watched it and I said 'Holy smokes!' I couldn't believe that they just did that. Never saw him do nothing like that before. So then I thought, 'Well, I'm gonna go down and, you know, see if it's dead,' which I'm pretty sure it was because it wasn't moving at all anymore. So I was gonna go and here, all of a sudden, I noticed all the herd, the whole herd;s coming back again. So then I didn't go down and wanted to watch and see what they're doing now. And here they all came, the whole herd came back and it came to that calf one at a time. And they went up to it and sniffed at it. And then they go on and the next one would come. Sniff at it for a little bit and then go on. The whole herd they went through that. And almost like they're paying their respects to it. And they circled around. And then once they all got done, they all took off. They left it. And it was dead. And so it was like a whole ceremony. And this went on for quite some time. And your mom and I just sat there and watched the whole thing out the window. And then your mom, you know how she is. She records everything. Especially when you guys were growing up. I mean, I don't know I think she's got every move you guys ever made on video somewheres. But anyway, she was like that she'd always record everything. And then she said that time she said, 'Geez, I can't believe we just saw that, you know, I don't know how long it was, but, and my cameras right here. And I never even thought about getting my camera. Man, I could have recorded that whole thing!' And I said, 'Well, you don't need to record everything, you have it recorded up here. That's where things like that should be recorded. And you never forget it and can bring it up anytime it's so you, know, it will always be there.' And so that [event] was the ultimate display of respect, I think, from them Buffalo. Paying their respects to that little calf. And the bulls, putting him out of his misery because they knew he couldn't make it anymore,*

*and he gave up and ee didn't have no more will to live. So they just took him out. And that in itself is respect.*

*You know then, so all those things are demonstrations I think of respect, and in your mom not being able to record it? That is respect. Or you know, you don't need to record things like that, just be part of it. And so I think, you know, all the way around those were lessons of respect and displays of respect. In my opinion - the way I understand respect anyway. (DuBray, "On Respect")*

Every time I hear this story, I get extremely emotional. My eyes well as I recount it here. I think about the complexity of the relationship dynamics we see here; a complexity simultaneously simple and pure when we cast away the Western influence on our thinking that compartmentalizes and heirarchalizes humans and nonhumans and instead make room for the age-old truth that we are kin. What a full circle moment it is for me to second-hand "witness" this moment and see the parallels between our ceremonies and what I think is only right to call a Buffalo ceremony of some sort. How beautiful it is to see Buffalo line up in the way I have at funerals my whole life. Yet a certain sadness comes over me when I consider the sense of awe I feel. Why am I awestruck by something so natural? Of course Buffalo have ceremony. Of course they love each other. Of course they respect each other and of course we learned these things from them - at least in large part. I sit with these simultaneous senses of melancholy amazement and try to extend grace to myself in acknowledging that perhaps this awe isn't my dismissal, but rather a consequence of the systemic oppression the Buffalo face, too. I will focus on their resilience and retention of their values and practices in spite of it all; they give me hope that we can continue to, too.

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While the stories thus far describe lessons of respect through witness and my dad's observation of Buffalo interactions, other stories shed light on the lessons to be learned from directly interacting with the Buffalo themselves. As is common in many Indigenous cultures,

stories often reflect lessons learned “the hard way.” In this story, my dad retells my cousin’s account of a close call with a bull:

*Okay, I’ll tell you another one about your cousin. One time he was working for me and he was chasing his big bull that had got out. So he’s trying to get it back in. And so he got right behind that bull. And he got too close to it, and he was getting mad at it because it wasn’t doing what he wanted it to do quick enough, I guess. So anyway, he was getting kind of too close and abusive a little bit. Anyway. He said he got right behind it and he was really trying to, make it go fast. And then here, he said, this bull kind of jumped. And he said, “Why is that bull jumping?” And all of a sudden, he was right there where the bull jumped. And he saw there was a big washout that he couldn’t see till he was right there. And then just as he saw it, he hit that big washout. He kind of went in it and then that four wheeler went in and hit right into the bank of the washout. And then it flipped over and it flipped him over, so he did a few somersaults. He said then landed, and he was worried about that bull, because that bull was right there. And this thing threw him off right towards it. So he was looking for that bull and he knew that was probably gonna get him now. And he said, that bull was just standing there looking at him, and he’s just maybe 10 feet away. And he said, he was he didn’t know what to do. And all of a sudden, he said that four wheeler come and ran right over the top of him. Because it had flipped over, threw him off and then it bounced up out of that washout, and it was still on its wheels, and then it came again. And so just as he’s looking at that bull, it came and ran right over him. [chuckles] And he said, so then he was laying there and he wasn’t sure what happened. He didn’t know what hit him. He thought another Buffalo must’ve hit him at first. Here it was that four wheeler, that’s what happened. He didn’t know it till after it was all over. And then he looked up again, he said that bull had walked up there and was looking right down at him, looking him right in the eye. And letting him know, he said, he said, “it’s almost like he told me ‘next time, buddy, you know, I could do you in and right now if I wanted to, but I’m gonna let you go. And the next time, your history’”. And he said “I could just tell that’s what that was. The way he looked at me. That’s what he was saying.” He said “Man, I was so scared that I was done for” he said, “but he just turned and walked away. And let me go.... But he sure could have had me if he wanted me.” I thought that was pretty good, too. So it taught [your cousin] a little bit about respect too. (DuBray, “On Respect”)*

Telling this story got him thinking about several times *he’s* been chased himself. My dad has been very transparent about the lessons he’s learned the hard way. In honest humility, he discusses the times he has “messed up” with the Buffalo. Importantly, he reflects on what he

learned from his mistakes and in doing so, he provides a glimpse into the process of a decades-long formation of a relationship grounded in respect. In the following story, he talks about how, to this day 30-some years later, there are some old cows who still chase him because he crossed a line in their early days together:

*And then there's some of these old cows that I probably, uh, disrespected in their younger days. And there's a couple of them, they've been after me for a long time. And remind me that 'remember back when?' you know, and, and then to this day, they still try to get me when they get a chance. And I kind of feel bad about that because I know that somewheres I messed up. And I don't specifically remember, but I know that I had to and that's why they're doing that. And a lot of it has to do with them four wheelers. And I used to chase em around on them four wheelers all the time. And they remember that, and they hate them four wheelers. And so I don't even use a four wheeler anymore because of that. Because I know they don't like them. But I do know that when that was taking place, that's when it happened was on those four wheelers. And so I don't even, I don't even use them anymore. And I don't blame them for not liking them, you know. And so I, that's the way I understand it. But there's a couple of them old cows hat have come awful close to making me pay the price. And they wait. And they know when I'm not paying attention when they know when I'm not looking like I should be, and they wait for when I'm in a position where I'm going to have a hard time getting out of there, getting away. And then here they come. And then I realized 'Dang I wasn't paying attention. What am I gonna do and I got to get!'" So yeah, that happens. That happens still. But that's just a couple of them. And I even thought that one of them old cows [chuckles] I thought "okay, you're going to get me - I know that one of these times, I'm going to not be paying attention and you're going to be successful, and you're going to get me. So maybe next time I need to butcher a Buffalo, you should be the one. So next time you don't have a calf, that could happen.' And she's had a calf every year since then. So that never gets to happen. And which I think is cool, too. It's almost like she knows that I know that and think that so she's just not gonna let it happen. [chuckles] And that's okay, that's cool. (DuBray, "On Respect")*

It's funny, really, how every time he tells stories about close calls and dangerous situations, while often times people listen entertained but in fearful disbelief, their grimaces displaying their preconceived notions of Buffalo as scary beasts that are often the seeds for arguments in favor of detainment and domestication, my dad's eyes twinkle and he smiles softly. He loves this about

them. He respects it. He admires the Buffalo for holding him accountable and reminding him of what happens when you don't honor that respect. I also admire that about them, and I admire my dad for it too. What's special, though, is that the Buffalo reciprocate that same respect back to my dad. People comment on his established relationship with the Buffalo often. He tells me, "one of the things that I've had a lot of people say that I've been around when I'm doing anything with the Buffalo does, they say, 'Geez, you know, they seem to really know you,' because somebody else tries to do what I'm doing, and they won't allow it." It's true and I've seen it myself. Even just over spring break, I watched in terror as my dad got trampled by several young 1000 pound bulls in the corrals while rounding them up to sell. I don't discount his luck in making it out alive, heavily bruised and battered, but with no broken bones, nor do I discount my highly warranted fear for his safety. But somehow, as I think back to the event a few weeks ago, I smile when I think about how he slowly peeled himself off the ground, recovering from getting the wind knocked out of him, and said "they wouldn't have gone over me if they'd have had a choice. It's my fault anyway for not closing that gate." While I've always assumed a big part of this is people simply not being familiar with working with Buffalo, and I think this is still true, I naively discounted how much of my dad's ease is based in relationship as opposed to skill. He says, "...they know me, they understand who I am. And they know that I respect them. And so they respect me, they know that I'm not going to hurt them, they know I'm not going to harm them. And so they allow me to do things that they won't let anybody else do. Because we've had that kind of relationship for a long time." He brings his hands to his heart and tells me, "... and I can sense it, and I can feel it. So do they." I, too, trust those bulls wouldn't have gone over top of him if they had a choice. Part of me wonders if maybe, his minor injuries weren't entirely due to "luck" after all.

*On These Hills, My Homelands*<sup>9</sup>

*For miles and miles in each direction, I'm surrounded by the vast rolling hills characteristic of the Great Plains. I walk up the hill to his gravesite, the dead grasses crunching underfoot, my labored breath visible in the recently chilled Autumn air. A coyote slinks down the browned ridgeline, startling a doe and her fawn who moments prior sat peacefully at the water's edge and who have now disappeared beyond the stubby scrub oak trees. The dried sagebrush still offers a subtle but fragrant spice to the air, and I reflect on my love for the multitudes of this place, my homelands.*

*As kids, it was these richly green draws that Beau and I would traipse through on our "missions" - accompanied by the incessant hum of summertime bugs and the sweet and familiar song of the meadowlarks. It's these hills' sharp wild plum thickets that scratch my sun-tanned skin on hot July days as I make my way through them in hot pursuit of juicy, purple juneberries to fill my ice cream-bucket-made-harvest-basket. It's these hills that, covered in soft snow, we sledged down in pure, childish glee, and trudged back up with rosy cheeks and icy eyelashes. It is these hills that the Buffalo pass through time after time, making narrow and bumpy trails to follow down to the river. It's these hills my dad stood atop crying as a tiny child in 1954 watching his home float away after the Army Corp of Engineers dammed our river. It is these hills I've sat atop and cried myself, and these hills that have absorbed the tears of my shame, my fear, my heartbreak, my anger, and my grief. It is these hills where my dear little brother's cold body was laid to eternal rest two short years ago.*

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<sup>9</sup> This section is an adapted and shortened version of a creative nonfiction piece I wrote for Mark Labowski's "Creative Expression in Writing" course in Spring 2023 with the intention of potentially including it in this thesis.

*These hills - this Earth - has celebrated with me, her grasses dancing to the beat of the drum under an orange and pink painted sky. She has grieved with me as she helped lay to rest the hundreds of Buffalo we lost to that vicious disease last year. She has embraced me as I laid under the moonlit sky trying to remember who I am. Her winds have carried my pleading sobs from hilltop to valley and her fragrant medicines heal my spirit and carry my prayers. Her prairies nurture the perfectly pink prairie roses that my dad would pick for my mom, and her side-hill soils grow the woody tinspila that bob to the top of my soup bowl funeral after funeral, ceremony after ceremony, and celebration after celebration, the harvest and savoring of the fruits of my labor connecting my grieving and joyous heart to the love and solace of my ancestors.*

*As a kid, these hills weren't particularly special to me beyond being my home and the only place I knew. But when I look out the big picture window of our home now, I feel a melancholy warmth as my eyes scan the snow-patched hills that stand between me and the frozen river beyond them. This makece and these hills hold the essence of my ancestors, the memories of my childhood and my father's, the prospect of my peoples' future, and the bones of my built-in best friend. These hills have held every generation of my family in their tender embrace through every event of colonial pain and every assertion of radical resistance. How hauntingly beautiful it is that this land has witnessed the intergenerational entirety of my self.*

*I sit on the hilltop and let my body melt into her with a dual sense of safety and unease in my certain vulnerability, these hills knowing me for everything I am and loving me despite everything I am not.*

~

## *The Buffalo and Me*

Something I've come to appreciate in the past six months or so that also came up in discussing respect with my dad is how I now have my own personal, direct experiences with Buffalo that reinforce and expand my understanding of the lessons I've learned indirectly through what the Buffalo have taught my dad. Hearing him retell the stories of the lame calf, the wolf, and my cousin and the bull that all exemplify Buffalo's internal and external communications and structuring of respect make me think back to the hours I spent watching them this past summer.

I'll never forget the evening when I heard and saw the Buffalo communicate with each other so explicitly. I had crept closer to them in the 4x4 and cut the engine in hopes that they'd stay; to my disappointment, I had already disrupted them and scared them over the hill. Luckily, they stayed and within twenty minutes they were comfortably grazing all around the ranger, with a few curious individuals coming up to sniff at the tires before finding a new and particularly tasty patch of grass. Calves nursed and slept contentedly, exhausted from another long, hot day. I felt so lucky and honored that they trusted me enough not just to stay but to relax and rest a mere four feet away from me. I watched for about an hour as the sky went from a perfect summer blue to a soft muted pink. I witnessed the most loving mother-baby interaction and noted the behavior of the bulls who were particularly active and vocal, marking the beginning of "the rut." They would grunt, almost growl, and make themselves known to all the females. I was already fascinated by the shift in herd dynamics I'd observed that week as the bulls became more involved and dominant in the herd, and how bulls communicated with the females. But then came the moment when it became clear which bull was the leader. A small bunch had just meandered North from the herd. It was getting close to dark and one bull that had been keeping

his eye on me started to get antsy. He frequently pawed the Earth and wallowed in the dirt he loosened, and I was starting to get a bit nervous. He let out three really long, drawn out growls - a noise that I hadn't heard yet - and all the cows and calves that were lounging and grazing got up casually but quickly and started to head North. It was an incredible demonstration of herd communication and the herd dynamics during the rut. The bulls were finally in charge and they were making it known.

Then, this bull got up and ran circles around the few bulls who didn't want to follow suit and obey until they too got up and headed North. Of course I knew Buffalo communicated with each other, and I had been witnessing it all summer, but this moment where a unified message was sent to and respected by the whole herd was a first for me, and it was so powerful. I started the engine and left too, but I headed South as I understood it was time for me to go, and perhaps I had overstayed my welcome. Thinking back to this moment, I feel so grateful to have this first-hand experience that reinforces a reciprocal notion of respect between me and the Buffalo - an understanding on a deeper level than I had from listening to and trusting the stories my dad told me. I find another example when I think about the feeling I get when a Buffalo looks me directly in the eyes. While it's never a "bad" experience, I've always found it to be unnerving, the way the Buffalo seemed to see right through me." I figured I was unsettled by my assumption and feeling that they could see through any facade or mask I was trying to put on, a hybrid manifestation of my own recognition of my insecurities and their recognition of what beliefs I had about myself that weren't true; a simultaneously comforting and unnerving thought. After having a recent conversation with my dad about respect though, I think employing a framework of respect helps me make better sense of that feeling. In a world where true and genuine, wholehearted respect is rare, perhaps I feel vulnerable when it's being extended to me.

This framework reminds me of the past two times I've run my dad's sketchily rigged up gate when working Buffalo through the corrals. Working Buffalo is an intense and stressful ordeal for everyone involved. My dad does everything he can to minimize the stress on them, out of respect, but nonetheless it's an unideal experience of heightened emotions. Much to my dismay, I ran the most dangerous position second only to my dad of course, operating two gates simultaneously - one to the round corral where a small bunch had been separated from the group, and the other to the narrowing alleyway to the chute. When my dad and I had successfully separated off two or three of *those* Buffalo to get to the chutes, my dad then left the round corral to head towards the chutes where the vet crew and National Park Service helpers were collecting samples to contribute to research on the highly deadly disease that has devastated our herd over the past 1.5 years, *Mycoplasma bovis*. When dad was gone, it was my job to keep the gates closed by leveraging one against the other and praying the other didn't get pushed open. There were some young bulls left in the round corral that were becoming increasingly agitated, pawing and running in circles, grunting and hooking at each other. A couple of times, a bull would run right up to the gate, and I could tell he was trying to gauge whether or not he could or should charge at it. I was scared out of my mind, because if he chose to do that, I'd be in trouble. So, in near desperation, I tried to ease his stress and assure him I wasn't a threat and that he'd be ok. I sang to him softly in Lakota, I called him *sicesi*, I tried to calm my own mind to avoid emitting even more stress, and knowing eye contact could be further stressing him out, I made sure to divert my eyes and be still. While I don't think I necessarily calmed him down, I can't help but believe that at least part of the reason he didn't charge was because he respected me and my intentions. I believe it would be foolish of me to dismiss his emotional intelligence and to ignore the gut feeling that we would all be okay, despite my inexperience and fear. I feel so much

gratitude for this newly heightened, visceral understanding of respect as not only reflected through the stories I've heard, but now also personally extended to me by the Buffalo.

Moving forward with all these reflections in mind, what does respect in Buffalo restoration look like, then? In the previous sections, I've outlined the Lakota values that define my dad's approach to Buffalo restoration and my own; I think there's a lot of value in our lived experiences and the lessons we've learned from them, and thus I share those stories here. However, I believe in any meaningful effort of Buffalo restoration, a collective effort, inspired and powered by the collective, shared values and actions of our community, is paramount. It is those experiences and lessons and the values inherited from them that give rise to this belief. That said, I recognize that approaching community conversations about Buffalo will not be easy. I am hopeful, but I am not naive. Hearing about my dad's experiences with political and other contention points surrounding Buffalo restoration has prepared me, at least in part, for a tough road ahead. He's talked about how hard resistance from our own people can be, and we've discussed thoughts around why that resistance exists. I've been around and aware long enough to have witnessed some of it for myself. But in our conversation about Grandma Laura, something else came up that as I think towards the future, I cannot shake.

I asked my dad what Grandma Laura thought about the work he was doing for the Tribe when he first started his Buffalo restoration work. It was shocking to me to hear him describe an almost ambivalent sense of pride or approval, laced with hesitation. But then he described an ideology from that time that simultaneously broke my heart and reinforced my wholehearted, uncompromisable belief in the necessity of Buffalo restoration for my people. He told me that a lot of the elders he talked to about Buffalo, the people who carried the most knowledge of our relationship to Buffalo, were also often very fearful of his efforts. They were afraid that if

Buffalo restoration were to be successful in revitalizing and restoring wellbeing to our people, that the federal government would eradicate them again. Because as children they grew up in the period immediately after eradication, raised by family and in communities who directly experienced it, they simply didn't think they or our people could go through it again. He tried to assure them that that wouldn't happen again, and that even if they tried, the world wouldn't let them. But he says they weren't fully convinced.<sup>10</sup> Tears dripped from my cheeks as my dad shared this with me. I'm reminded constantly of the dark history that gives rise to my purpose, my dad's, our lives' work, no matter the hope and resilience that it's grounded in. How does this history and these feelings craft the Buffalo restoration narrative that I believe? As someone who rejects succumbing to a victim narrative on the basis of it being antithetical to who we are as Lakota people and to actual decolonial action, to what extent do I and should I allow it to? How can we, as a people, acknowledge, process, and heal from the traumas of the past in a way that doesn't sacrifice our future to a vicious cycle of deficit and victimhood? How do Buffalo fit into both our respective and collective healings?

I don't have solutions and I don't have answers, but I have experience and I have ideas and I have dreams and I have hope, and I believe a collective compilation of hopes and dreams is what's necessary to build a healthful Lakota future from an imagined otherwise. A future where our children learn from the Buffalo herd as much as they do at home, where "radical" becomes obsolete terminology, and where our dreams are actualized and tangible.

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<sup>10</sup> From DuBray, "On Respect"

### Chapter Three: A Healthful Lakota Future & Radical Hope

Thus far, this thesis has provided the personal, familial, and historical context that explains how and why Buffalo are intrinsic to my conceptualization of radical hope. I have also alluded to their ongoing, necessary role in the holistic health and wellbeing of my people. This leaves a vacancy as to where and how these concepts manifest in the actual imagining of a healthful Lakota futurism - the ultimate function of this research. In this final “chapter,” I focus less on the empirical research into the historical and personal histories that inform the previous two chapters and instead take a more conceptual route through a sort of literature review of concepts of health, care, and hope. In the first section, I aim to situate Buffalo restoration more directly within an anthropological context of “health,” including references to health crises in my community, to demonstrate its potential as a tangible mechanism to reconceptualize, redefine, and realize Lakota “public health.” Next, I include a brief review of some of the relevant literature on radical and decolonial hope. Finally, I finish with both my dad’s thoughts on hope and futures and my own. My goal here in this extended conclusion is to offer additional contributions that aid in my active thinking about why Buffalo restoration is a valid mechanism of public health, the implications it could have on our Lakota future, and briefly, what stands in our way.

*Buffalo and Healing: Case Studies*<sup>11</sup>

The word decolonization has become a sort of buzz word, where sometimes entities claim to be decolonial or rooted in decolonization simply for condemning racism or believing that those who have and continue to suffer the consequences of colonialism have inherent rights. Even within Indigenous communities, what counts as decolonization work is sometimes convoluted. For instance, some tribal members and/or outsiders may believe that the sheer existence of Cheyenne River's Buffalo program is an act of decolonization, and to some extent, they would be correct. The fact that Buffalo are still here, in existence and among the Lakota people (and other Buffalo-peoples), is important and demonstrates the depth of our relational connection to them. However, it is dangerous to assume that any and all Buffalo programs and/or restoration efforts are inherently and truly committed to decolonization. Simply put, buffalo restoration means the revival of traditional Lakota practices such as hunting, butchering, cooking, and creating (clothing, artwork, house items, etc.) that in and of themselves carry lessons and come with relationship building that aid in Lakota identity formation for both men and women, which in turn aids in the overall healing of our people. Additionally, many aspects of Lakota culture, including many values, were born from lessons the people learned from observing the Buffalo. In a study on affective healing as related to Buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck reservation, an interviewee noted the absence of Buffalo and said teachings in his early life and discussed his own efforts to learn as an adult, saying "generations past, [tribes] kind of

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<sup>11</sup> This section is a minimally adapted section from my essay "*Winyan Hena Unkiksuyape Kte Heca*" which I included in the appendix (referenced in footnote 18) that provides relevant examples of a relationship of Buffalo being used to promote Indigenous wellbeing. I have removed this section from the appendix to avoid repetition and redundancy, but I want to point out the original context in which this section was written. It is interesting to consider the genealogy of my work and the different ways in which these ideas have been continually articulated and developed over the years.

mimicked the Buffalo in their society structure...the women took care of the children and the men protected them...who am I as a Dakota and Lakota man, you know? What's my responsibility? And I look at that Buffalo, knowing what he does, and so it just kind of gives me a little direction" (Haggerty et al. 26). Further, when inter-Tribal Buffalo restoration efforts surged in the 1990's, some of the newly active Buffalo programs implemented Buffalo observation "sentences" as a healing and culture-focused method of correction for people having home and social problems due to alcoholism (Zontek 94). Stories from the Fort Belknap Reservation tell of two women, one with a history of child abuse, sentenced to observe under the "Buffalo Watch Program" (now discontinued) who came to better understand and emulate their responsibilities as Assiniboine mothers (Zontek 94-95). Anyone who has heard the stories or been lucky enough to witness Buffalo mothering behaviors knows that they are everything a mother should be. Knowing too that Buffalo were societal models for Lakota people, it's not difficult to imagine the familial healing that reintroducing Buffalo into family lives would bring to Lakota parents, especially mothers, and Lakota children. Testaments to the lessons learned from the Buffalo in recent times in other communities show that reinstating traditional Buffalo practices can open our eyes once again to the true values of our people, and we can continually reject the damaging ideologies of the colonizer that, from the inside and out, hurt our people. In this way, Buffalo restoration very literally and directly can serve as a mechanism for Lakota public health.

One of medical anthropology's largest queries is into how Western medicalization of health concepts relates to failures in the treatment and understandings of poor health, particularly cross-culturally. With respect to how health is understood by Indigenous peoples such as my own, these failures can be attributed in part to the myopic nature of biomedicine and its inability to see health as a holistic experience. Medical anthropologists such as Kleinman, Scheper-Lock and Hughes, and Garcia provide valuable critiques of hypermedicalization and offer alternative frameworks that, at the risk of overgeneralization, provide potential mechanisms for conceptualizations of health that may allow for better cross-cultural understanding and respect for culturally relevant healthcare. Thus, these frameworks can be used to, for my purposes, support arguments for a radical, decolonial reconceptualization of Lakota public health where Buffalo restoration can be seen as a modality of care.

One manifestation of hypermedicalization can be found in the dissociation of cultural and societal factors from the biological. Together, Kleinman's ideas surrounding illness experiences and the Scheper-Hughes and Lock model of the three bodies provide a framework that can provide a more holistic conceptualization of health. In "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology," Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock challenge Cartesian mind/body dualism and describe three ways in which they believe body to be perceived: the individual body self, the social body, and the body politic (6-8). In *The Illness*

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<sup>12</sup> This section on the hypermedicalization of care has been adapted from work I completed under the mentorship of Paras Arora in the autumn quarter of 2022 for Professor Angela Garcia's Medical Anthropology class. The original paper offered close readings of Arthur Kleinman, Nancy Locke, Margaret Scheper-Hughes, and Angela Garcia. While this section still engages with these texts more than necessary, for inclusion in the thesis, I shortened and further connected the work to my thesis's argument concerning Buffalo restoration for health/as care.

*Narratives*, Kleinman offers an alternative to the hyper-medicalization of health by describing a difference between disease and illness, with disease referring to biological processes and illness referring to one's *experience* of symptoms and suffering (3-4). Kleinman invokes the social and political body when he states that illness experiences are "always culturally shaped" and further when distinguishes illness from sickness, which he defines as understanding disease "...in relation to macrosocial (economic, political, institutional) forces" (5-6). The intersecting and supporting ideas of Scheper-Hughes and Lock and Kleinman contribute to a sound body of theoretical support for a characterisation of health that transcends medicalization in search of a holism that more accurately reflects the values and understandings of Lakota people.

The refusal to incorporate holistic perspectives into analysis of illness can result in limited and insufficient attributions to solely the biomedical. Scheper-Hughes and Lock write,

“...the ‘illness’ dimension of human distress (i.e. the social relations of sickness) are being medicalized and individualized, rather than politicized and collectivized... Medicalization inevitably entails a missed identification between the individual and the social bodies, and a tendency to transform the social into the biological (10).

These misidentifications, including those that transform the political/socio-political into the biological, influence treatment and health outcomes that disproportionately harm marginalized communities. Regarding Lakota peoples, settler colonialism informs the body politic of our health and the way we understand illness and sickness. Racial capitalism and ongoing settler colonialism present our sickness as disease, ignoring our illness experiences and the colonial violence that shapes it - the sickness. In this way and in Garcia's example, we see the ways in which anthropological frameworks of the the three bodies (the body politic), illness narrative, and the patient-prisoner illuminate historical and modern failures in medicine and health and support more radical, holistic, and empathetic modalities of care and conceptions of wellbeing.

These concepts are clarified and exemplified when brought into conversation with the personal reality of suicide in my Lakota community. As beautiful of an experience as it may be to grow up on the rez, my family and community have experienced first hand the colonial context and conditions that give rise to the highly disproportionate rates of suicide among Native youth. Having lost several classmates, community and family members, and my own brother to suicide, it has had a profound and consequential influence on the way that I have come to understand Indigenous health and wellbeing. Scholarship, such as Dr. Angela Garcia's "Death as a Resource for Life" and *The Pastoral Clinic*, evidence the ways in which medical anthropology frameworks can be further used to conceptually navigate suicide, especially in Native communities, in a way that supports the intentions of those like myself that aim to reject the individualism and hypermedicalization of Western colonial ideology in favor of a more holistic and decolonial framework that can generate hope and care as part of a healthful Indigenous futurism centered around community care.<sup>13</sup> In this section, the works of Angela Garcia, Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper Hughes, and Arthur Kleinman will be woven together to demonstrate the efficacy of approaches to understanding care, addiction, and suicide that acknowledge colonialism, complexity, and socio-cultural histories in a careful, holistic way.

One of the largest and primarily detrimental factors in Indigenous public health is land dispossession as an ongoing consequence of colonialism. Through the storytelling of mother and daughter Eugenia and Bernadette, Angela Garcia, in "Death as a Resource for Life," supplies a

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<sup>13</sup> Note that there is a rich body of literature on Indigenous suicidality and suicide prevention that has been written by Indigenous scholars and medical professionals and often in collaboration with specific Indigenous communities. This section does not engage with this body of work, as my intention was to use the experience of suicide in my community to relate to the texts I present, not to dive into the ways Buffalo restoration could serve as a means of suicide prevention. However, given the deeply personal and urgent matter, this is absolutely a focus of my future research.

pertinent example of where land dispossession and public health intersect.<sup>14</sup> In both this chapter and throughout *The Pastoral Clinic*, Garcia weaves together theory and the embodied experiences of people like Eugenia and Bernadette to articulate how Hispano land dispossession and life thereafter is an example of death (loss) that is perpetuated through addiction to heroin, and further, an example of death as a resource for life. Garcia states this very clearly, writing “The land, ever present but out of reach, produces an idiom of loss and longing that expresses both the cohesiveness and fissures of family life. It is a witness to another time and to the death of a way of life” (Garcia, “Death as a Resource” 317). It is this historical context of land dispossession in the Española Valley that sets the stage for addiction to operate as a modality of genuine care, particularly with regard to family and kinship per Hispano ways of life and relating to land. Garcia writes “...bodily and affective states associated with addiction sustain a sense of familial commitment by generating salient ties of injury and care” (318). However, we observe a certain tension when heroin serves as medicine, which is in large part due to the oppressive contextual circumstances persons such as Bernadette and Eugenia embody.

A deeper dive into this facet of embodied oppression is essential to understanding how this example of heroin addiction and the anthropologic theory I employ relate to the broader intersection of loss, life, and suicide. In *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World*, Garcia uses Elizabeth Povinelli’s concept of an “intimate event” to make sense of the aforementioned tension, describing the intimacies of caregiving routines as they relate to heroin as medicine as “being produced at the intersection of individual agency and social constraint” - simultaneously an intentional and conscious act of love and care and a consequence of oppressive systems that prevented *alternative* forms of love and care (322-323). This relates to Lock and

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<sup>14</sup> “Death as a Resource for Life” is a section in Chapter 17 of Garcia's book *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium* (2015).

Scheper-Hughes' idea of the body politic and further, Garcia's own concept of the patient-prisoner model, which itself can be viewed as an extension of the body politic. Again, this idea challenges Cartesian mind/body dualism and hypermedicalization and argues for a more contextual and holistic conception of how we conceptualize health as people undergoing the onslaught of realities we do. Scheper-Hughes and Lock write, "...the 'illness' dimension of human distress (i.e. the social relations of sickness) are being medicalized and individualized, rather than politicized and collectivized... Medicalization inevitably entails a missed identification between the individual and the social bodies, and a tendency to transform the social into the biological" (10). Emerging from this is the utility of this ideology in understanding caregiving and loss within the contexts of addiction and suicide. Lock and Scheper-Hughes posit further that relationships between individual bodies and social bodies are not only natural or cultural but about power dynamics (23). These dynamics are manifested most consequentially in the medical gaze, described as "a controlling gaze, through which active (although furtive) forms of protest are transformed into passive acts of 'breakdown'" (27). When we think about this within the context of addiction in the Española Valley, we can see heroin's use as intentional and loving caregiving as a form of protest, an engagement with the body politic as defined by colonialism and dispossession - loss. Thinking of the body politic and returning to the idea of the intimate event, we are reminded that these embodied experiences of receiving and giving care are inherently political and thus local socio-political histories, such as those of the Lakota people and the Cheyenne River Reservation, must be accounted for. While, it is important to note the ways in which colonialism has influenced and shaped local modalities of caregiving that necessitate loss and/or violence, it is especially powerful to note the ways in which these modalities simultaneously transcend this colonial influence through such embodied rejection of

standard imagery of what care looks like. While my argument for Buffalo restoration as a public health mechanism is very different from Garcia's description of heroin-as-caregiving, the ethno-political and historical Hispano context of dispossession from which she develops this framework allows it to serve as a support for other modalities of radical care.

It is useful to now pause for a moment to think a bit more about what constitutes caregiving more generally. In "Catastrophe and caregiving: the failure of medicine as art," Kleinman writes of caregiving as a moral experience that operates primarily outside the bounds of biomedicine. He writes, "Caregiving is configured by economists as 'burden', by psychologists as 'coping', by health services researchers in terms of social resources and health-care costs, and by physicians as a clinical skill" (23). In "Death as a Resource for Life" Garcia writes, "...death-in-life is not a morbid manifestation that is somehow opposed to life, but rather a vital experience that provides a basis for life's meaningful unfolding, even generating hope for a future" (316). How are these authors' analyses relevant to one's own notions of care? To a larger notion of Lakota caregiving? Both authors use embodied experiences, be it their own as a caregiver in Kleinman's case or through storytelling in Garcia's, to conceptualize how the hardship of loss also births a context of care that is in its own right, life-giving. My point in analyzing these texts here is to show how Kleinman and Garcia, a thought sample from their field, articulate the theoretical complexity of care; I use their ideology to show that even within the literature, there is theoretical groundwork for re-evaluating how we define what care looks like - a central aspect of my thinking about mechanisms of Lakota public health and Buffalo restoration - mechanisms of care.

In *The Pastoral Clinic*, Garcia's analysis of Sigmund Freud's work on melancholia as well as her patient-prisoner model work together to sort of paradoxically support her more

hopeful claims in “Death as a Resource for Life.” Freud conceives the melancholic subject as one whose mourning has no end and in which, in Garcia’s words, “the lost past - remains persistently present” (Garcia 73). The history of colonialism and land dispossession in the Española Valley highlights how this framework of melancholia can be used to discuss the local, embodied experience of Hispano addiction and suicide in the milieu of the Española Valley. Garcia writes, “The ultimate irony is that which was ‘lost’ is still *there* for Hispanos to see. One wonders how Freud’s conception of melancholy can be extended to address such material losses, losses such as land that remain present but out of reach, especially in a context in which land is constituent to cultural identity and economic survival” (81). This history, while obviously different, makes Garcia’s work relevant to Indigenous communities such as mine who live the reality of loss to settler-colonial dispossession.

However, Garcia’s ethnographic work in *The Pastoral Clinic* also posits death and loss as being a source of future and life within the context of addiction. Garcia considers addiction to be an embodied consequence of dispossession to the future (55). She describes the clinic as a place to explore “how to live in purgatorial spaces” as well as patients’ question of whether a “future life” is worth living (56). However, in “Death as a Resource for Life,” Garcia takes a deeper dive and discusses care within her patient-prisoner model. Quoting Didier Fassin, Garcia writes “Survival ‘shifts lines that are too often hardened between biological and political lives; it opens an ethical space for reflection and action’ (2010, 93). Fassin cautions against reductionist understandings of survival for those living under oppressive circumstances, emphasizing the complexity and potentiality of subtle gestures and affects produced within the context of oppression” (325). Here, the patient-prisoner as an example of the body politic serves as an example of the way oppressive, colonial histories inform the complexities of caregiving and

further, how caregiving encapsulating loss can still generate a sense of future and life. This acknowledgement is essential to make if we plan to build a Lakota future of caregiving and health on our own terms, as criticizing and shaming our own people for surviving within these systems has no place in a radically healthful future. Criminalizing our own under the guise of rejecting a victim narrative hinders our collective ability to transcend models of survival and generate models of resurgence that allow us to thrive.

We can finally now think about how any or all of this discussion of loss, life, and care can help conceptualize crises like suicide in Indigenous communities such as my own that embody the oppressive realities of settler colonialism and historical trauma. Colonial land dispossession has been a chronic embodied experience for most all Indigenous peoples of these lands. Our historically and ongoing violent relationships to the federal U.S. government and semi-realized promise of sovereignty are held in the public health crises of our communities and environment, including addiction and suicide and the interconnected absence of relationships such as that to the Buffalo. We experience, in ways unique to the local experiences of each people/tribe/community, a chronic sense of interconnected loss - a loss of land, ancestors, relationships, and loved ones to colonial agendas and our subsequent internalized traumas. Much like Garcia questioned, how do we conceptualize this melancholic loss when mourning is not only ongoing in our inability to “forget” given its physical presence in our life, but also in the very literal way of death and loss to addiction, violence, disease, and suicide, or the ongoing absence of Buffalo that we see daily in the same space? What about the loss of identity, connection, and ways of knowing and doing we’ve experienced and continue to experience despite our best efforts to empower ourselves in the face of these realities? Again, this is *not* to adopt a victim narrative or deficit mindset when speaking about my community or any other

Indigenous community. My lived experience rejects the notion that we are anything but an incredibly resilient, dynamic, and beautiful people full of abundant hope and love and life. However, I ask these questions in hopes of casting my net far and wide in the search for cross-cultural ideology, theory, and scholarship that support a reevaluated approach to conceptualizing Indigenous public health, particularly with reference to especially complicated crises of suicide and addiction. An approach that first, visibilizes the complexities of caregiving and the colonial landscapes in which care is developed and second, acknowledges the necessary resiliency and survivance behind our abilities to transform loss into a form of life within a continually oppressive system.

Many more intricacies, possibilities, and perspectives are required to properly target the ways in which colonialism, racial capitalism, and systemic violence continue to shape Lakota health. Putting these three texts in conversation with each other gives us a glimpse of how outside theory can try to understand the holism of health as Lakotas, which makes them useful for navigating change within the realms of medicine and public health. However, these theories will always fall short in their ability to conceptualize holistic health from outside of the culture and further, from the colonial comforts of academia and the English language. It is important to note that this discussion lacks Indigenous theory or scholarship and is meant only to make sense of these existing, outside texts from the perspective of myself as a Lakota woman with my own understandings of my people, history, culture, and community. That said, I believe these texts to be a useful and unique addition to the existing academic dialogue surrounding suicide in Indigenous communities, though I of course recognize that the most valuable dialogue comes from our communities themselves. Within the context of Buffalo restoration, then, it is remarkable to consider how, despite their interconnected experience of loss and their own

continued oppressive reality in the United States, Buffalo continue to live well and, as always, embody life-giving care. Should we embrace this and approach them with the intention and respect they deserve, I believe Buffalo can and will lead us into a healthful Lakota future.

### *Hope in the Literature*

*“We need to be creating a present that will inspire a radically different future than the one settler colonialism sets out for us...This means not centering white allyship but building relationships with our comrades in other [communities]that are already doing this work in the context of their own communities and movement- constellations of co-resistance. And it means doing this work in the present so our kids know what freedom feels like...so they know what to fight for.”<sup>15</sup>*

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2016)

*“You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”*

Angela Davis (2014)

Naturally, when thinking about how the last two chapters relate to the future, we kick-start a conversation on hope. However, as I have tried to emphasize, I am not interested in the type of hope that justifies inaction or that reconfigures dreams to fit the Western, colonial notion of what is “realistic.” I am interested in radical hope, a concept discussed by many liberatory thinkers and scholars, especially Black and Indigenous activist, abolitionist, and feminist scholars, that demands action and struggle. In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson walks us through Nishnaabeg thought and teachings of how we as Indigenous peoples can use our ways of knowing and doing not merely as resistance, but “resurgence” too. Throughout the book, Simpson urges us to center engagement in active, community and culture-based work to reject and dismantle heteropatriarchy and capitalism and reclaim our true values as opposed to

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<sup>15</sup> This quote comes from another Leanne Simpson work, an essay based on a correspondence with Eve Tuck titled “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance.”

striving for merely a seat at an oppressive table, describing this work as fundamental in an effort of Indigenous resurgence.<sup>16</sup> In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin Kelley expresses this as a sentiment of Black radicalism, writing “The idea of a revolution of the mind has always been central to surrealism as well as to black conceptions of liberation...I am talking about an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change” (205). Similar to the concept of radical resurgence, Kelley describes this as “revolutionary commitment” and in reference to the work of Black activist and surrealist poet Jayne Cortez, writes “Jayne Cortez dreams anti-imperialist dreams. It is not enough to imagine what kind of world we would like; we have to do the work to make it happen...Cortez exemplifies the revolutionary commitment that has always been at the heart of the black radical imagination” (187). Several other activists, thinkers, and scholars have reflected the necessity of actualizing our hope in the ways we operate daily and the ways we move through the world. It is in alignment with Simpson, Kelley, Davis, and Cortez that when I discuss hope, radical hope, I discuss it as practical praxis as opposed to abstract, untouchable theory.

### *Hope, Personified*

Returning to the source-knowledge which underlies this paper, to Indigenous perspectives grounded in experience, expressed through storytelling, we can, in fact, engage in hope as praxis. Here, I include my dad’s raw responses to my questions on hope and futures to bring the scholarship full circle and connect it to the lived reality of his and my Lakota lives:

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<sup>16</sup> Another one of Simpson’s main arguments is that a “radical resurgence project” is really “just Indigenous life as it has always unfolded” (Simpson 247). This foundational sentiment reflects the sentiment I addressed in the methods of this thesis, noting Indigenous literary scholars’ thoughts on storytelling and arguing that what I refer to as the “mundane” is precisely what allows authentic storytelling to be a radical, decolonial method. In other words, storytelling, in this way, is intrinsic to discussing a radical resurgence project.

What gives you hope?

*The Buffalo give me hope when I see their unapologetic and unwavering resistance to being mistreated and acculturated into domestic livestock. I often compare them to the growing number of native youth who I see sharing that same resistance and the thought of those two powerful forces reviving their symbiotic relationship allows me to feel hope becoming reality. I firmly believe that if our youth can once again learn from the Buffalo and absorb their strength and spirit then that hope will become reality.*

When are you least hopeful?

*I am least hopeful when I see the Buffalo being disrespected and treated as a mere commodity to be exploited.*

What does an ideal future look like - for your descendants, your *takoja*?<sup>17</sup>

*My view of an ideal future would require a fundamental paradigm shift in guiding philosophy that currently prevails. Rather than adhering to the current ideation that humans are somehow exempt from the laws of nature and superior to all other forms of life, my ideal future would have us transition to a dominant theme of mitakuye oyasin, where respect for all living and nonliving things was the new guiding principle along with understanding the interconnections of all our relatives. Genuine respect for the natural world rather than all the artificial and self-serving manifestations we have created and imposed upon our world would be my ideal reality for my descendants.*

What are your reflections on my involvement in the work you sparked for our family, and what does it mean to you that I'm involved in this work?

*Your involvement in Buffalo restoration has made me extremely proud, second only to your birth. Your unique understanding and insight are critically important in taking restoration to higher levels. I used to worry that my efforts might fade away when I do, but when I hear you speak, and feel your passion and commitment my worries fade away. Having my daughter involved with Buffalo restoration makes me feel like perhaps I did something right. I feel blessed and I know that the Buffalo are blessed to have you as an advocate and relative. Your unique insight and understanding often requires me to look deeper into my own understanding of our unique relationship with our Buffalo relatives.*

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<sup>17</sup> *Takoja* means “grandchild/children” in Lakotiyapi.

What has surprised you? If anything?

*I am a firm believer in what I refer to as Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is the same as what some refer to as animal instinct. When I hear my daughter speak or reflect on her understanding of her relationship to the Buffalo I proudly bear witness to Indigenous knowledge that has been passed along, presenting itself to the world. Not so much a surprise as a comforting thrill each and every occasion.*

I am beaming with pride and reveling in the beauty of intergenerational love.

~

### *Final Thoughts*

*“A lot of Indigenous scholarship ends with resurgence as the mechanism to move forward without adding substantively to the conversation of how to do this, and still others have talked about nationhood, nation building, and a recentering of Indigenous political thought without mentioning resurgence to any degree.”*

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (2017)

We arrive once again at the question “what’s next?” Returning to Cheyenne River’s Buffalo program, I zoom out again, thinking about the various efforts of Buffalo restoration across the country: their flaws and downfalls, intentions pure or not, visions in alignment with my understanding of respect and integrity or not, decolonial or not. I think about the countless conversations I’ve had at home, on the phone, in the Stanford NACC, at conferences, and on road trips where I’ve shared my frustrations big and small. How is it possible for a Tribe to have a Buffalo program and still perpetuate harm? Why are our leaders - unknowingly or not - gatekeeping health and prosperity from their own people? How can we prevent Tribal politics from corrupting something as pure and *good* as a (grounded) Buffalo program? It is these questions that have made true and meaningful Buffalo restoration seem impossibly radical and

out of reach to many. But I think when we really get into it, this mindset traps us within a cycle of complicity and allows for a perpetuation of harm. My dad once said something that has stuck with me ever since. While self-determination policy is generally touted as a win for Indigenous rights, my dad says “...they figure they forced us into assimilation to the point that now, they don't have to force it anymore. They can let us determine to do that to ourselves. Self determination - that's what it means to me.”<sup>18</sup> While this isn't to discount the very real progress that self determination policy has allowed, I think my dad makes a very strong point salient to how we plan to move forward as a people. For example, while this thesis did engage with the role heteropatriarchy plays in the shaping (or rather misshaping) of health and Buffalo restoration on Cheyenne River, it is an imperative aspect of any meaningful effort of Buffalo restoration moving forward.<sup>19</sup> Leanne Simpson writes, “...heteropatriarchy is a foundational violence and dispossessing force used by the state, replicated by its citizens, and internalized often unwittingly and unknowingly by Indigenous peoples” (*As We Have Always Done* 51). Necessary conversations about how cisgendered Lakota men uphold colonial gender violence in our communities, knowingly or not and both within and outside of “decolonial” spaces, are yet to take place. Conversations about our own peoples’ complicity in the ongoing violence of Western agriculture against our bodies and land - also yet to happen. Our people and our communities have to be willing to engage in some difficult discussions about holding ourselves accountable to the change that’s absolutely within our control to make.

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<sup>18</sup> From “On Tribal Policy and Responsibility.” (2022)

<sup>19</sup> Given this thesis’ emphasis on my dad’s work and my relationship to it, I did not include a critical discussion of heteropatriarchy within Buffalo restoration. I believe to do it justice, I would need to include a meaningful dialogue with other Lakota women, which was beyond the scope of this project but is a focus of my summer research post-grad. However, I have engaged briefly with that aspect of this work in the past, and have included a non-comprehensive and not particularly rigorous essay in the appendix for a glimpse into my first substantive thinking on this topic in 2021. As referenced in footnote 10, a section providing case studies of Buffalo as healing was cut from the appendix, adapted, and included at the outset of this chapter.

I believe “radical” change doesn’t solely exist in the “otherwise” dreamworld. I believe the most radical thing we can do is open our eyes to the very real possibility that this otherwise/these dreams/these changes are entirely within reach - every day - and the choice is ours to pour time, energy, labor, love, and tears into birthing this future for ourselves and future generations. *This* is the mindset I believe Buffalo restoration necessitates as a public health mechanism, as a beacon of radical hope, and as a pathway to a vibrant Lakota futurism. I’m grateful for all the people, beings, stories, and experiences that have shaped this mindset in me, and I am committed to spending the rest of my life believing in and actualizing change with my relatives near and far. My dad said that the time he felt most hopeful was when a group of “elders from our community said they could hear the thunder of the Buffalo coming back and it was like music to their ears.”<sup>20</sup> I can’t hear them yet, but I can feel them. I feel them when I look at my dad, as I write their stories, and as I breathe, and I look forward to the day when I, alongside my community, can hear them once more.

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<sup>20</sup> From “On Boarding School, Hope, and Futures.” (2023)

Appendix: <sup>21</sup>

*Winyan Hena Unkiksuyape Kte Heca* (“We Must Remember Women”):  
Lakota Women, Decolonization, and Buffalo Restoration on Cheyenne River

[...] As tends to be a common manifestation of internalized colonialism in Indigenous communities, Native women are often not included in efforts of so-called “decolonization”. The origin of this issue lies within the process of how Native women have been falsely described and presented by patriarchal Western society, which has “left a legacy of marginalization within indigenous societies as much as within the colonizing society” (Smith 48). While the literature increasingly acknowledges past and continuing violence of colonization (such as harmful policy, impacts on physical and psychological health, war, disease, population decline and land loss), only recently have scholars begun to focus on the disruption of traditional gender roles and the unique experiences of modern-day Indigenous women (Mihesuah xiv). This is then also true within specific decolonization efforts such as Buffalo restoration. There are many concerns regarding various manifestations of internalized colonialism in tribal Buffalo restoration initiatives both locally on Cheyenne River and on a larger scale. However, in this section I aim to focus on 1) the potential impacts and benefits of Buffalo restoration for Lakota women, which simultaneously highlights the ways in which Lakota women have often been excluded from and/or not prioritized in Buffalo restoration efforts and then 2) discuss the necessity of Lakota women’s inclusion in efforts henceforth for restoration to be truly decolonial, both in hopes of providing underrepresented and important considerations for the CRST as it moves forward with its Buffalo program.

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<sup>21</sup> Note: the very beginning of this essay and a paragraph from the body have been cut from the appendix, adapted, and used in Chapter 3. Placement of this “missing” content is designated twice by a bracketed ellipsis.

Perhaps it is important to start with a salient reminder of some ways women fit into Lakota creation stories and oral tradition, though non-comprehensive, as this topic is much too extensive and significant to fully cover here. As is true for many Indigenous peoples and nations, divine and sacred women hold prominent positions in oral tradition and spirituality. For Lakota people, the highly respected *Ptesanwin* (White Buffalo Calf Woman) is one such figure, whose gift of the sacred pipe and rites to the people in a time of great need is cherished to this day. In one iteration of Lakota people's emergence from *Wasun Niya* (Wind Cave), Sicangu Lakota author Joseph Marshall III tells of the Woman Who Stayed, whose selfless sacrifice and transformation into the Buffalo brought prosperity to the people and initiated the reciprocal and gratitude-grounded relationship between Lakota people and the Buffalo (Marshall 89-115). Mihesuah notes that although most all Native nations seem to have the traditional sacredness of women woven into their creation stories, traditional customs, and/or language, "...women's powerful economic, political, social, and religious positions within most tribes are not honored as they once were, violence against Indigenous women has escalated, and many women suffer from psychological stress brought on in part by identity confusion" (Mihesuah xiv). Moving forward in conversation about Buffalo restoration for Lakota people, one must take these realities into account, as remembering women's value, traditional roles, and historic and contemporary struggles is essential to any act of true decolonization.

Dakota scholar Waziyatawin Angela Wilson writes, "The recovery of traditional knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization because for many of us it is only through a consciously critical assessment of how the historical process of colonization has systematically devalued our Indigenous ways that we can begin to reverse the damage wrought from those

assaults” (Wilson 72). This notion carries onto the damages colonialism has influenced our own people into perpetuating, namely violence against women and children. [...]

The conversation about Buffalo restoration as a means of men’s identity formation, healing, and breaking cycles of intra-Tribal violence against women is an important one to have. However, while absolutely valid, significant, and necessary, it’s often the men’s narrative that dominates answers to the questions that pertain to the “who” and “why” surrounding Buffalo restoration. As an example, consider a day when Lakota men are regularly participating in a revived, traditional Buffalo hunt. They feel more firm in their identity as Lakota men, participate in other cultural practices and ceremonies, and one can assume this would mean living their lives firmly in Lakota values (which would include respect and appreciation for Lakota women). Hopeful hypotheticals such as this are rightfully common in (often men-dominant) Buffalo restoration spaces. However, the conversation surrounding identity formation is not limited to men, and women’s benefits of Buffalo restoration are not limited to the cessation of violence by men or collective benefits such as Lakota food sovereignty. All of these benefits are extremely significant to Lakota people and should be striven for, but it’s necessary to also recognize and include the direct impacts of Buffalo restoration on Lakota women and femmes, including identity formation, in the decision-making and goal-setting of restoration plans and mechanisms.

Collective healing through decolonization must include reviving and honoring traditional gender roles. Mihesuah writes, “knowing tribal traditions (including women’s places in tribal tradition) can help modern Natives cope with the complex - and impersonal - world by offering them foundations to form their identities and to create strategies for dealing with adversity” (Mihesuah xv). Perhaps most obvious, though still glossed over when discussing the hopes and dreams of large-scale Buffalo restoration, is the revival of women’s practical Buffalo roles, like

butchering, hide-tanning, and making household and clothing items from Buffalo hide. While many Lakota women have continued to engage with traditional roles as creators with the available materials in the absence of Buffalo, butchering (especially of Buffalo) is traditionally a women's role that is now, of course with exceptions, performed by men. Besides a particularly special event on Cheyenne River in the 90's where a Sicangu Lakota elder woman did a filmed demonstration of a Buffalo butchering in the Lakota language, dominant coverage and discussion of this process appears to be associated primarily with men. While both men and women have roles in obtaining Buffalo meat, honoring and upholding traditional gender roles in such practices is important to Lakota women's identity formation and in turn restoring traditional gender balance amongst the people. Beyond gender balance, women's empowerment is vital to collective healing given the traditional and significant contributions of Lakota women to Lakota culture in general and as mothers and caretakers of future generations of Lakota people. Native women's identity formation requires additional thought and attention given the additional influences of Western patriarchy and misogyny, both within one's tribal nation and in society at large. These influences continue to affect the way Native women are seen within their tribes, influencing both the roles and positions they may have within tribal government or socio-political standing and their treatment by men (Mihsuah 42).

Although this essay only briefly engages with multiple facets of Lakota women's involvement and stakes in Buffalo restoration, the underlying theme that weaves these concepts together is women's empowerment through the revival of traditional, cultural knowledge and practices as a means of decolonization and healing. For the Lakota people, this has to be discussed within the context of Buffalo restoration. Liberating ourselves through people, Buffalo, and culture-centered Buffalo restoration cannot happen in such ways if Lakota women are not

paid due diligence. Bringing the Buffalo back is about re-strengthening our relationships - to the Buffalo themselves, to the land, to each other, and to ourselves. Failure to appreciate the unique challenges and special relationships of Lakota women, femmes, and *winkte* within the context of Buffalo restoration will render the movement insufficient in decolonization. We must remember Lakota women.

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