



Of Bison Bones and Fine China: egan Approach to Genocide on the Plains

Deborah Madsen, University of Geneva

“The gaping wound of colonialism
is this notion that nothing is
connected to anything else”

Anon. <http://inappropriateculture.tumblr.com>



This paper is inspired by my current research project, generously funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, which documents ethical vegan engagement with intersecting social justice issues of the long 19thC.

The quotation (SLIDE), “The gaping wound of colonialism is this notion that nothing is connected to anything else,” is a comment on a 2015 art installation to which I will return at the end of the presentation. Settler colonialism is motivated, though, by a more fundamental ideology, that of human exceptionalism: the assumption of human superiority over all other animals that enables the objectification, killing, and consuming (as we will see, not just as meat) of other-than-human animals. Human exceptionalism bestows an exemption from being treated as “other-than” or “less-than” human and impunity to treat all beings deemed “less than” as objects of use.

Ethical veganism recognizes, and is a response to, this paradigm of violent hierarchical relations that affects all less than human beings (we will see the historic parallel between the genocides of Native humans and Native bison, a parallel that tends to animalize Indigenous peoples rather than humanize the bison). Indeed, one of the effects of the 19thC annihilation of the bison was domestication – of the starving, dispossessed Plains tribes and of the bison that were also confined to reservations. In this presentation, I use a vegan intersectional lens to highlight the fact that “everything is connected to everything else”: Manifest Destiny, US settler colonialism, anti-Indigenous racism, human exceptionalism, and industrial capitalism.


Paul Seesequasis, “Bone China” *The Rusty Toque*, June 30, 2015

BONE CHINA



Saskatoon, 1886
Saskatoon Public Library Archives

1886 – Saskatoon a rail worker poses along stacked cubes of bison bones, holding a stick to measure or reveal the depth of the shipment.



1878 – Regina, the bones, stacked in a pyramid, have been surmounted by one man who strikes a dramatic pose, like a conqueror, at the summit while another stands at the base.

Pile of bones.
Queen's city.

The world of the plains tribes has shattered. There is only emptiness. The ground no longer shakes. *paskwawimostos* is gone as are the prairie wolves and grizzlies. It is starvation time now. It is smallpox season. It is desolation. The great clearing. Roundup time. The corralling of the last of the *wild* onto reserves. The national dream speaks in silent screams. Its posters entice newcomers from far away with promises of free land, agriculture, homestead and bountiful progress.

The bones are being loaded in boxcars now and following the track east. Back to the port of Montreal and onto ships bound for the land of the Great White Mother. There, millions upon millions of bone fragments and skulls are being crushed into bone china. They emerge as prized tea sets, adorning the tables of the finest tea houses of London. *paskwawimostos* is now a fragile utensil held by index finger and thumb in the service of Pax Britannica. Tea from far away colonies of Ceylon and India are seeped into the bison bones.

They kiss the lips of Lords and Ladies and in the Palace itself.

paskwawimostos is a serving set of delicate white bone china with purple violets and gold trim.

The colonial tea party is to be marked by the picking up of a napkin.

In June 2015, the online open access journal *The Rusty Toque* published, as part of the series “In the Public Domain,” the digital prose-poem “Bone China” by Plains Cree writer Paul Seesequasis. The series required that contributors respond to a text, image, or video from the public domain. In “Bone China” Seesequasis responds to three historical photos held by the Saskatoon Public Library Archives (dated 1878, 1890, 1891) that depict towering stacks of bison bones, waiting to be shipped for processing into products including fine bone chinaware. The poem juxtaposes historic with contemporary allusions, evoking Patrick Wolfe's description of settler colonialism as a process (not a singular event) that has as its aim the elimination of the Native in order to clear space for the creation of a new permanent colonial settlement. Accompanying the physical process of settler colonialism is a discursive process of history-writing, the legacy of which endures both in settler ideology and in acts of Native resistance.

Seesequasis' poem reveals the enduring significance of the historic bison holocaust – as part of the “animal genocide” of the fur trade, described by Anishinaabe scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor (*Treaty Shirts*, 2016) – that produced not only the conditions for bringing the Plains peoples into submission to the US settler-state but also the underlying capitalist motives of this slaughter. The poem engages not only with the superimposition of settler statehood on Indigenous land but also the persistent spectral traces of Native resistance that have been obscured by successive attempts to erase Indigenous presence from the colonial record. This discursive erasure works in tandem with Manifest Destiny (as we will see in the recent videogame *Red Dead Redemption*) and through, for instance, the figure of the “white savior” featured in films such as *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*, who shows himself to be “a better Indian than the Indians” (and I choose the term “Indian” deliberately). In these texts, the speciesist discourse of “human exceptionalism” grounds the ideology of Manifest Destiny, as well as the ongoing processes of settler colonization and the commercial interests it serves.

Paul Seesequasis, “Bone China”

Sun bleached bones. The railway cuts through in Regina and Saskatoon. The arterial artery of nation building. Risen monuments to the great disappearance shimmer in the heat. The northern plains bison herds have vanished.

US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Bison Range MT:

1500 30-60 million bison in North America

1700-1800s bison disappear from the East

1830s “mass destruction” begins

1844 Hudson’s Bay Company trades 75,000 bison robes

1860s railroads across the Great Plains divide the herd into southern and northern

1862 the Homestead Act was passed by Congress

1869 the first transcontinental railroad was completed

1870 2 million southern bison killed this year

1872-74 5,000 bison killed each day

1872 bison hunting promoted as sport

1873 barbed wire fencing was introduced

1874 end of the southern herd; 7 million pounds of bones shipped by one company

1880 slaughter of northern herd underway

1884 325 wild bison in the US

1889 1,000 bison left in North America

1885 (Canada) **1899** (USA) protective legislation

1905 American Bison Society founded

2016 Bison declared the US “National Mammal”



Key moments in the destruction of North America bison:

1862 when the Homestead Act was passed by Congress;

1869 when the first transcontinental railroad was completed; and

1873 when barbed wire fencing was introduced to the West.

Railroads and Manifest Destiny

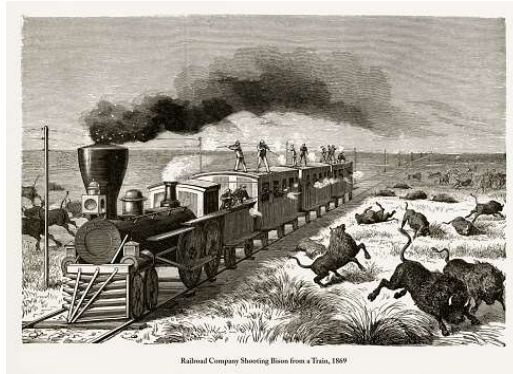
“arterial artery of nation building”

Construction of the railroads:

- brought many workers who needed to be fed, in part with bison meat

Operation of the railroads:

- enabled organized hunting tours that allowed sports hunters to shoot bison from the safety of the railroad cars;
- brought hunters and settlers who accelerated the extermination of the bison;
- transported hides and bison bones for Industrial processing



See: Gilbert King, “Where the Buffalo No Longer Roamed: The Transcontinental Railroad connected East and West—and accelerated the destruction of what had been in the center of North America.” (2012)

Construction of the railroads:

brought many workers, often immigrant workers (such as the Irish and Chinese) who needed to be fed, a need satisfied in part by bison meat.

Operation of the railroads:

1) enabled organized hunting tours that allowed sports hunters to shoot bison from the safety of the railroad cars; see IMAGE from 1869

2) brought professional hunters and pioneer settlers, both of whom accelerated the extermination of the bison;

In his autobiographical account, *Buffalo Bone Days: A Short History of the Buffalo Bone Trade*, (1939) Major Israel McCreight notes the

“tens of thousands of discharged Civil War soldiers who flocked west for a chance to make a living; the thousands of trappers, traders and professional hunters; the gold seekers and adventurers and the rum peddlers and those who sought work or pleasure on the general movement to get a foothold in the exciting frontier; they were a human flood, which, like a broken levee, overflowed the Indian country, and as conquering hosts, swooped down on the helpless buffalo herds and annihilated them as if they were a vile vermin instead of a highly valuable natural resource.”

3) Trains also and crucially transported hides and bison bones for industrial processing.
(SLIDE 5) ...

Railroads, Bones, and Industrial Capitalism “stacked cubes of bison bones”

1886 ~ Saskatoon a rail worker poses along stacked cubes of bison bones, holding a stick to measure or reveal the depth of the shipment.



... Trains transported bison bones for industrial processing.

Elaine C. Prange Turney offers the following numbers: in the period 1872-1874, “the major rail lines shipped roughly 32,380,000 pounds of bison bones, representing approximately 550,000 animals and more than \$161,900 in revenue (at an average of \$10 per ton). (p. 46)

In a wider chronological perspective, Israel McCreight (who started his career as a bookkeeper for a buffalo-bone broker in the Dakota Territory) claims that: “from 1868 to 1881 more than two million five hundred thousand dollars was paid out for buffalo bones in the Kansas section alone; ... this tonnage accounted for thirty one million animals.” He concludes, “ it was a business of great magnitude and amounted to many millions of dollars, and had a far-reaching effect in the 'Winning of the West.'”

Paul Seesequasis, “Bone China”

1878 ~ Regina, the bones, stacked in a pyramid, have been surmounted by one man who strikes a dramatic pose, like a conqueror, at the summit while another stands at the base.

Pile of bones.

Queen's city.



“Pile of bones,” or “Where the bones are piled,” is the English translation of the Cree name (oskana kâ-asastêki) for the site of the settler city of Regina, which was named in honor of Queen Victoria in 1882.

(Cree Literacy Network, <https://creeliteracy.org/2019/03/17/joe-fafard-oskana-ka-asasteki-%EF%BB%BF/>)

“Animal” Genocide and Military Conquest “like a conqueror”

The US Army and federal government actively endorsed the bison slaughter:

- to allow ranchers to range their cattle, which replaced bison herds,
- to subdue Plains Indigenous nations,
- to repeat successful Civil War campaigns against Confederate food sources.

In 1874, Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano testified before Congress: "The buffalo are disappearing rapidly, but not faster than I desire. I regard the destruction of such game as Indians subsist upon as facilitating the policy of the Government, of destroying their hunting habits, coercing them on reservations, and compelling them to begin to adopt the habits of civilization."



General Phillip Sheridan, in a communication to Commanding General William Tecumseh Sherman May 2, 1873.

"[The 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 Indian's 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; but for a lasting peace, let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle."



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(Wooster, p. 171)

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According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, in 1875: "Few bison remained in Texas when the state legislature moved to protect the bison. However, General Phillip Sheridan appeared before the assembly and suggested that every hunter be given a medal with a dead buffalo on one side and a discouraged Indian on the other. He added that once the animals were exterminated, the Indians would be controlled and civilization could advance." (n.pag.)

Earlier, in a communication to General William Tecumseh Sherman, dated 2 May 1873, Sheridan, praised bison hunters who did more to defeat the Indian nations in a few years than soldiers did in 30 years.

See William T. Hornaday, *The Extermination of the American Bison* (1889).

Red Dead Redemption (2010) and Manifest Destiny

“My people have already endured many disasters. Before, this was all our land.”
– Nastas



(2010)The link between bison extermination and Manifest Destiny forms part of the gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption*. (San Diego: Rockstar Games, May 2010. Xbox 360)

<http://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption/features/wildlifeandhunting>

This videogame, created by Rock Star Games (the same people who brought you the *Grand Theft Auto* series) is a 3rd person, open world, western action adventure game that belongs to the genre of the “revenge” Western. The game includes “Hunting Challenges,” which reward the player for hunting down and killing specific numbers of certain animals.

In one of these challenges, the player competes for the “Manifest Destiny” achievement by killing all of the bison in the game world; each bison corpse can be stripped for items of value that enable the player to advance successfully in the game. The game website describes how, “In addition to the thrill of the hunt, you can also make a great deal of money from hunting. Things like meat, fur, feathers, hides, claws, teeth and tusks all carry a value. Earn even more cash by selling animal parts to shops further away from an animal’s native territory.”

Here is an excerpt from a YouTube play-through of the game. ...

In his 2016 essay, “Reclaiming Past, Resisting Progression: Existential Tensions in Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption*”, Michael Samuel argues that the assertion,

“My people have already endured many disasters. Before, this was all our land.”

by the Native character Nastas, forms part of the game's negotiation of historical change and the narrative of nation-building; specifically, the transition to modernity from the old “Wild West” is made possible by the character MacDougal's acknowledgement that “it was always all about killing rather than romance, honor, and nobility” (pp. 183-84). Nostalgia for the national myth is balanced against a historical realism that owes much, in fact, to the game designer's research into Hollywood representations of the West.

I want to pause here for a moment to reflect on these representations, specifically the hunting of bison.

Paul Kane, “The Buffalo Hunt” (1850)



We need to go back to images like this, of the 1846 Métis buffalo hunt, by settler-Canadian Paul Kane, who also painted bison hunts in the Dakota Territory, paintings which established a conventional physical narrative that is repeated in Hollywood movies and often enacted by the “white savior” figure – such as Union Army Lieutenant John J. Dunbar, in Kevin Costner's 1990 film *Dances With Wolves* or US Marine Jake Sully, in James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar*. Let's quickly compare hunting scenes in each film ...

Dances with Wolves (1990) The Buffalo Hunt



Dunbar has a rifle; the Sioux hunters are armed with arrows and lances. Dunbar comes to the rescue as the white savior, with his marksmanship and his technology, symbolizing the birth of the settler “American” hybrid of Indigenous knowledge of land plus European technology.

Avatar shares the same use of triumphalist music and dramatic gestures in the sequence that depicts the hunting of the bovine Sturmbeest ...

Avatar (2009) The Sturmbeest Hunt

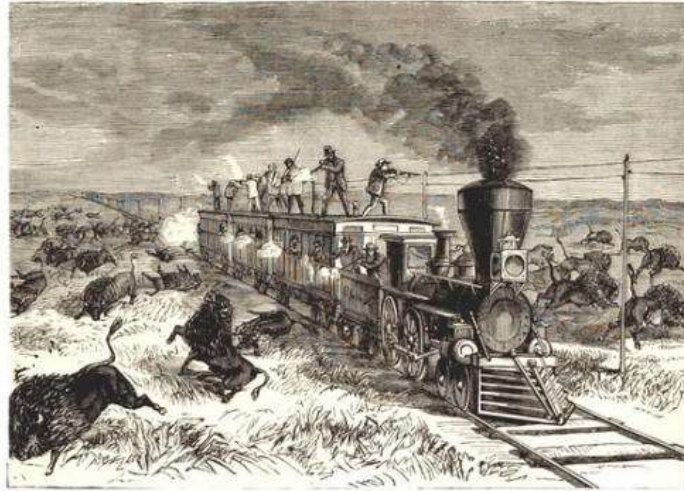


Sully stands in saddle to fire his arrows while other Na'vi hunters are armed with lances and the animals fall in the same gesture as the fallen bison after they are struck.

The hunters ride flying “mountain banshees” (known in Na’vi as Ikran) and weave among the stampeding herd in the same manner as Costner’s warriors on horseback and the Métis hunters in Paul Kane’s painting.

These narratives physically contrast with images that represent a very different historical experience of bison hunting, such as ...

Bison Hunting from a Train



Great Falls Tribune, April 4, 2023



Opposition to the 2023 Yellowstone Buffalo hunt

This billboard image of a hunter pointing an automatic weapon at a peaceful herd was erected to protest the recent Yellowstone bison hunt that resulted in the slaughter of nearly 25% of the herd (nearly 1500 bison). Animals that remain confined within the perimeter of the National Park are exempt from hunters but those that move outside the Park boundary become “fair game.” This confinement of the bison to a reserve or reservation provides a further context to Seesequasis's poem.

Paul Seesequasis, “Bone China”

The world of the plains tribes has shattered. There is only emptiness. The ground no longer shakes. *paskwâwimostos* is gone as are the prairie wolves and grizzlies. It is starvation time now. It is smallpox season. It is desolation. The great clearing. Roundup time. The corralling of the last of the *wild* onto reserves. The national dream speaks in silent screams. Its posters entice newcomers from far away with promises of free land, agriculture, homestead and bountiful progress.

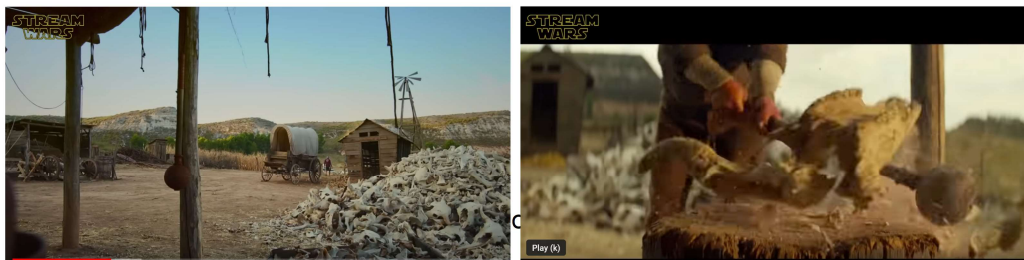
paskwâwimostos pl. plains bison;
paskwâw plains + *mostos* bison



Settlers and Bison “Bone Pickers” “promises of free land, agriculture, homestead and bountiful progress”

“Notice to Farmers: I will pay cash for buffalo bones. Bring them in by the ton or hundred. I will give fifty pounds of the best twine for one ton of bones, for this month only, or a \$40 sewing machine for forty tons. I want 5000 tons this month.

Grafton News and Times, 23 July 1885, p. 1



The English (2022), screenshots

These screenshots are from the recent television mini-series, *The English* (2022), which I am not going to discuss in this presentation but in the Q&A if anyone is interested to ask.

In its online history, the Ebonex Coporation, the largest producer of bone black pigments in the U.S., quotes this “Notice to Farmers,” published in the *Grafton News and Times*, 23 July 1885: “I will pay cash for buffalo bones. Bring them in by the ton or hundred. I will give fifty pounds of the best twine for one ton of bones, for this month only, or a \$40 sewing machine for forty tons. I want 5000 tons this month.” (p. 1) As this advertisement suggests, cash was seldom paid to bone pickers. Many times, bones were given in trade to merchants. Receipts given to bone pickers, called Buffalo Bone Money, could be used at any merchant in exchange for much-needed building lumber as well as food and other supplies. The income from “bone picking” enabled settler families to survive the first years until a steady income from agriculture could be established. (<http://www.ebonex.com/history.html>)

According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service: “Bison bones brought from \$2.50 to \$15.00 a ton. Based on an average price of \$8 per ton they brought 2.5 million dollars into Kansas alone between 1868 and 1881. Assuming that about 100 skeletons were required to make one ton of bones, this represented the remains of more than 31 million bison.” (<https://www.fws.gov/bisonrange/timeline.htm>)

Donald R. Prothero & Robert M. Schoch, in their 2002 study of hoofed mammals on the Plains, note that: “Homesteaders used bison bones for fuel and raised needed cash by collecting and selling bones to commercial bone traders. ... The bones left after the carcasses had rotted were used in commercial sugar refining, to make fertilizer and glue ...” as well as buttons, umbrella handles, corset stays, crochet hooks ... Bone black (or animal charcoal pigment), fertilizer and gelatin production were running at their peak during the late 1880’s and early 1890’s. (p. 97) As was the manufacture of fine bone china.

Paul Seesequasis, “Bone China”

The bones are being loaded in boxcars now and following the track east. Back to the port of Montreal and onto ships bound for the land of the Great White Mother. There, millions upon millions of bone fragments and skulls are being crushed into bone china. They emerge as prized tea sets, adorning the tables of the finest tea houses of London. *paskwâwimostos* is now a fragile utensil held by index finger and thumb in the service of Pax Britannica. Tea from far away colonies of Ceylon and India are seeped into the bison bones.

They kiss the lips of Lords and Ladies and in the Palace itself.

paskwâwimostos is a serving set of delicate white bone china with purple violets and gold trim.

The colonial tea party is to be marked by the picking up of a napkin.



Colonialism in The Potteries

“paskwâwimostos is a serving set of delicate white bone china”

Circa 1800 Josiah Spode introduced bone china. His recipe of six parts bone ash, four parts china stone, and three and a half parts china clay remains the English standard.

Rapid growth in the popularity of bone china was due to:

the trade war preceding the Opium Wars and heavy import duties on Chinese porcelain;
less merchant shipping available because of the need to sustain naval and military forces overseas;
the patronage of the Prince of Wales, leader of taste at the beginning of the nineteenth century;
the growth of the professional and merchant classes provided a market. (www.thepotteries.org)

“a serving set of delicate white bone china with purple violets and gold trim”

Royal Albert China: “In 1896, Thomas Clark Wild bought a pottery in Longton, Stoke on Trent, England, called Albert Works, which had been named the year before in honor of the birth of Prince Albert, who became King George VI in 1936. Using the brand name Albert Crown China, Thomas Wild and Co. produced commemorative bone-china pieces for Queen Victoria’s 1897 Diamond Jubilee, and by 1904 had earned a Royal Warrant.”

“Provincial flowers series”: 1975 – 2001; Purple violet = state flower of New Brunswick

“They kiss the lips of Lords and Ladies and in the Palace itself.”

(Animal) “Bone ash retains its cellular structure even after calcination.”

Susan Mussi, *Ceramic Dictionary*



The website devoted to the Staffordshire potteries (thepotteries.org) attributes the initial development of bone china to Josiah Spode II, who introduced it around 1800.

His original basic formula of six parts bone ash, four parts china stone, and three and a half parts china clay remains the English standard.

Bone china very quickly became popular for several reasons linked to British imperialism, such as heavy import duties on Chinese porcelain (more than 100% at the end of the 18thC) due to the trade war with China that preceded the Opium Wars.

(<http://www.thepotteries.org/types/bonechina.htm>)

In Seesequasis's poem, bison are transformed into

“a serving set of delicate white bone china with purple violets and gold trim”

This is the “Provincial flowers series” manufactured between 1975 and 2001 by Royal Albert China. (<http://www.royalalbertpatterns.com/series%20pages/Provincial%20Flowers.htm>)

In the *Ceramic Dictionary*, Susan Mussi explains that, while substitutes for animal bones (such as calcium phosphate) are available, their properties are quite different. Very significantly for one of these differences is that “Bone ash retains its cellular structure even after calcination.” (n.pag.) In Seesequasis' poem, bison bones are brought into the Palace, right into the heart of the colonial metropolis, where “They kiss the lips of Lords and Ladies” on a literal, physical cellular level. What a powerful levelling move this is! A compelling rhetorical gesture of cross-species commonality.

“Go West” by Roger Peet

Black: Random Coachella attendee, 2014. Red: Bison skull pile, South Dakota, 1870's
"IN//APPROPRIATE," Littman & White Gallery, Portland State University, July 2015



“Peet suggests that white people see the world differently, and "IN//APPROPRIATE" uses a clever visual trick to demonstrate. He has paired images of cultural appropriation with scenes of or related to racial injustice from history or the present day. He invites gallery-goers to view his pieces with the naked eye and through 'whiteness goggles' that resemble 3D glasses.”

“The culture-appropriating white girl in a headdress is connected to the slaughter of the buffalo, which was an indirect form of genocide the U.S. government committed against Plains Tribes. But seen through 'whiteness goggles,' the image of the buffalo skulls disappears. All that remains is a girl in a headdress.”

“White people, Peet suggests, simply do not see historical significance. The minorities they imitate, on the other hand, are painfully aware of it at all times.”

Indian Country Today. July 23, 2015.

“Go West” by Roger Peet is the art installation, a response to which was the quotation that started this presentation. A review of the exhibition explains that:

“Peet suggests that white people see the world differently, and 'IN//APPROPRIATE' uses a clever visual trick to demonstrate. He has paired images of cultural appropriation with scenes of – or related to – racial injustice from history or the present day. He invites gallery-goers to view his pieces with the naked eye and through 'whiteness goggles' that resemble 3D glasses.”

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“White people, Peet suggests, simply do not see historical significance. The minorities they imitate, on the other hand, are painfully aware of it at all times.”

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/07/23/artists-whiteness-goggles-blot-out-significance-culture>

Race is certainly a powerful filter through which history is transformed into narrative. So too, I argue, is the fundamental discourse of species. The white man in the photograph here is standing at the pinnacle of a mountain of dead bison that were once sentient beings that wanted to live. An ethical vegan focus on the “other than human” blocks the ideological filter of human exceptionalism, exposing the complex network of power relations that depend upon the notion of “less than human,” revealing that “everything is always connected to everything else.”

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