



WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity
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ISBN 978-1-55238-891-4

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“My Bones Have Known this Land Long Before Alberta Was Born”: Intersections in Indigenous Geography and Indigenous Creative Expression

Tasha Hubbard

Alberta, born as a province in 1905, shares a literary history with the other two prairie provinces, all underscored by their agrarian roots. However, Melnyk and Coates elaborate on Alberta’s contemporary evolution in the “Introduction” to the first collection of *Wild Words*: “With a population in 2008 that was almost triple each of the other provinces and with an oil and gas economy (extraction, processing, and transportation) that was booming, Alberta evolved into a different kind of entity” (ix). Alberta’s literature, influenced by its diversified economy and impressive geography, may have moved away from agrarian narratives, but what underscores those narratives never completely disappears. In her introduction to *Wild Words*, Aritha van Herk claims that “Our writing cannot help but be influenced, positively or adversely, by this spectacular space and our specular gaze” (2). In this vein, the land is an object of admiration, a mirror for reflection, and usually, a fodder for the economy.

However, if we consider Alberta’s literary history, as well as just how that land was settled in the first place, we need to return to the genre of prairie literature. Jenny Kerber, in *Writing in the Dust*, reminds readers that we must employ a historical consciousness of the legacies that form the foundation of the writing: “In the prairie region, those cultural and environmental legacies have been profoundly shaped by colonialism—a

fact that becomes clear when one considers how much of the canonical literature and criticism about prairie landscape or nature-related writing has been entrenched in a white male settler tradition” (16). Within a settler understanding, the land is an empty space to be filled, altered, and conquered, thereby contributing to the agrarian myth. As Shirley McDonald spoke about at the 2012 Association of Literature, Environment and Culture in Canada Conference, the agrarian myth is a self-legitimizing discourse brought about through settler labour. The hard-work pioneer narratives seek to calcify a claim to the land.

Despite the narrative of empty space, the territory of what is now known as Alberta already had long-standing occupants, namely Indigenous peoples and buffalo, who were seen as obstacles to the primary settlement goals of farming and ranching. Patrick Brantlinger describes this process as follows: “The creation first of the new white colony in the wilderness and then of the new nation-state demands the vanishing of the primeval others who cannot become or supposedly refuse to be part of its future” (190). The use of the term “wilderness” needs to be unpacked to reveal the underlying assumptions that place Indigenous peoples and buffalo on the deficient (and therefore inevitably extinct) end of a dichotomy of wilderness versus civilization, with civilization and domestic animals emerging victorious. The buffalo, conservatively estimated to be thirty million strong at the time of contact, were removed through a lethal combination of military intervention, government policy, and private enterprise and Indigenous peoples’ lives were subsequently devastated. By the 1880s the buffalo was eradicated, and the “empty space” was realized.

Furthermore, wilderness discourse, according to Jodi Adamson, “fails to account for what happens to indigenous peoples after they are removed” (16). An examination of the numbered Treaty history of Alberta sheds light on the attempts by Indigenous peoples to continue to survive on their homelands. The lands of the buffalo range within the province of Alberta are the sites of Treaties 6 and 7, concluded in 1876 and 1877 respectively, the first with the Cree and their allies and the second with the Blackfoot and their allies. Indigenous peoples wished to participate in the new economy and requested support to do so in exchange for sharing the land to the depth of a plow with the newcomers. However, they did not forget the buffalo and asked for protection of the few that were left as part of the Treaty negotiations. They were not successful. The collective authors of a publication

discussing the oral history of Treaty 7 maintain that, “[a] significant number of Cree leaders, including Big Bear, Piapot, and Little Pine, who were committed both to the goal of preserving the buffalo and to making the transition to agriculture, did not sign the treaty because they doubted that the government would honour the treaty agreements” (Treaty 7 Elders et al. 221). They were correct. The Indian Act was passed in 1876 and effectively regulated the non-participation of Indigenous peoples in the new settler economy, despite promises in the Treaties. Oral history of Treaty 7 reveals the Treaty Elders’ understanding that the buffalo were purposely slaughtered in order to facilitate Indigenous people’s removal. Tom Yellowhorn is quoted as saying “the two governments agreed to try to kill off all the buffalo” so that Indian people would no longer have a livelihood (101).

Despite being physically and metaphorically erased from the land, Indigenous peoples and their stories of the buffalo are both remembered and resurgent in Indigenous literatures. It is my hope that anyone who participates in what van Herk calls a specular gazing exercise sees Indigenous literatures, some of which existed long before Alberta came to be, reflected back at them. George Melnyk, in *The Literary History of Alberta*, argues for the inclusion of petroglyphs and pictographs, such as Writing-On-Stone, within the category of Alberta literature, contending that, “Placing Alberta’s literary origins outside the history and traditions of English language and literature is not an act of cultural appropriation but a recognition of the cultural diversity this land has spawned” (8). I agree, and yet would go a step beyond the concept of “culture” and say that these sites, stories, and songs of the people form the foundation of Blackfoot, Tsuu T’ina, Nakota, Cree, and Dene nations.

The late Narcisse Blood taught me about the Blackfoot word “manotoya,” meaning “they got here yesterday,” which refers to the waves of settlers who came to this land. Indigenous literature has a history and origin that vastly predate provincial boundaries and narratives. “My bones have known this land long before Alberta was born” says Emma LaRoque. The title line is taken from the Cree-Métis scholar and poet’s monograph *When the Other is Me: Native Resistance Discourse 1850-1990*. She reminds us that Indigenous creative expression can be understood in the following way:

[I]t is about a whole way of perceiving, practicing, and connecting land, knowledge, skill, and spirituality, and human-nature relationships from our land-based cosmologies. If “cultural difference” has any meaning, it lies here. But now it is a difference that has obviously been compounded by dispossession and repeated geographical and cultural dislocations. Even so, land remains central to Aboriginal ethos, even to those who are distanced from it. (136)

I wish to examine the poetry of several Indigenous women who have ties to Alberta and who write about their own histories they share with buffalo: a legacy of being cleared and dislocated from the land. I am interested in the potential of applying an emerging Indigenous geography to several of their poems that lament, remember, and rejuvenate the relationship between land, buffalo, and Indigenous peoples. Beth Cuthand, Marilyn Dumont, and Louise Halfe are grounded in their respective land-based cosmologies and are affected by physical and psychic dislocation from the land. Their work reflects what Donelle Dreese describes as a “reterritorialization,” or the retrieval of a sense of place as integral to rebuilding an identity impacted by colonial constructions of land and people (17), which includes the imposition of patriarchy on both. I wish to include gender as part of this decolonizing discussion. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey explains the gendering of space and place in this way: “From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (179). Thus, the work of these women answers back to the imposition of white male space on the land, which is both embedded and legitimized in western-based geographies.

Western geographies empty place of Indigenous peoples and their stories, replacing them with alternative stories, such as the agrarian myth (and more current narratives), revealing what Oakes and Price describe as the intricate relationship between the making of place and the making of meaning (254). Indigenous geographies make a concentrated effort to decolonize a discipline of study that has a long history as a colonizing tool. Integral to the geography, or literally “place” writing, is mapping, a practice

that can claim space as part of an imperialist agenda. Physical mapping in the colonial tradition seeks to claim, freeze, and calcify place as domain for white males. In contrast, mapping within Indigenous geographies seeks to be inclusive and reflective of those who share the land—both human and non-human, male and female. Indigenous geographies function similar to the ways post-colonial geographies function. Bill Ashcroft describes the latter as “interpolat[ing] the discipline, employing some conventional practices and technologies and yet injecting them with non-Western ways of conceiving space (perhaps even ways that are totally incommensurable with Western conceptions)” (151). These non-western conceptions of space come out of the Indigenous cosmologies that LaRoque referred to earlier.

A geography invested in western space conceptions is primarily interested in the physical surface (or depths in the case of resource extraction) of the land and borders. However, Indigenous geographies are not bound by the same limits. In “Resisting Exile in the “Land of the Free”: Indigenous Groundwork at Colonial Intersections,” Anthony Tyeme Clark and Malea Powell push beyond the boundaries usually set by western geography: “We think of the physical landscapes and Indigenous geographies as they connect and constitute the world above, below, and on the earth as a series of mutually constitutive and interdependent relations” (10). These relations constitute more than human relations but also correspond to an understanding of kinship to water, animals, and other beings who live on the land. Understanding peoplehood to be inclusive of other beings besides humans automatically shifts the relationship to the world around us to one of respect. Kainai writer Betty Bastien explains kinship in this way: “The natural world with its various resources are [sic] experienced as inter-related in a manner that respects all its beings—whether the wide-open grass plains for the buffalo or other four-legged animals, or forested hills for shelter, or timbered river valleys for winter camps, or roots, berries, and plants” (12). What Bastien describes is knowledge of the way in which each living being is important and has a role. According to Vine Deloria Jr., “everything in the natural world has relationships with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it” (34).

People and the landscape do not exist in individual stasis bound by arbitrary distinctions and boundaries; rather, people understand themselves to be within an interconnected and dynamic place filled with

history and meaning. According to Margaret Kovach, “Place links present with past and our personal self with kinship groups. What we know flows through us from the ‘echo of generations,’ and our knowledges cannot be universalized because they arise from our experience with our places” (61). What echoes through countless generations is not a romanticized concept, but a very real influence for Indigenous writers and for their readers too, if they are willing to listen.

The land and an Indigenous understanding of the complexities of our connection to the land profoundly influence the creative expression from those writers who seek to repair or rejuvenate a relationship temporarily damaged by colonization. Halfe, Dumont, and Cuthand use poetry as their main vehicle of expression. Robert Warrior, a leading Indigenous critic, discusses the ways in which Indigenous writers have adopted, adapted, and used poetry as a form of resistance against European systems: “Poetry has provided a vehicle for such resistance because of the way it can unsettle prevailing ideologies and give voice to what is not being spoken within a culture” (117). Thus the land and its inhabitants become central again to Indigenous peoples after decades of dislocation and disassociation.

Dean Rader, in *Engaged Resistance*, suggests Indigenous poetry pushes back against western poetic forms that are about “demarcation, borders, and boundaries” (128). Using the language of geography, Rader’s discussion opens up a dialogue on how Indigenous poetry can function as “compositional resistance” to the borders and boundaries on the page, and I would argue, on the land itself. Indigenous poets’ work seeks to overturn *terra nullius* and other mythologies, or what Andrews calls “the very basis upon which dominant narratives of discovery and nation-building were constructed” (141). Critiquing and questioning dominant national myths eventually create space for an Indigenous poetics to reflect Indigenous conceptions of self, nation, land, and relations. Rader discusses Navajo poet Lucy Tapahonso and the ways in which she “elicits an utterly original perception of how a geographic space becomes part and parcel of the language spoken within it and the people who live on it” (139). While Rader is discussing Tapahonso’s specific Navajo poetic sensibilities, there are commonalities with the way plains Indigenous poetics are influenced by the geographic space of the prairies. Cree scholar Neal McLeod defines “Cree space” as a “metaphorical way of describing the narratives, the land, and all the things that allow the nehiyawak to express themselves in relation to

their ancestors” (86). Cuthand, Dumont, and Halfe’s Indigenous poetics respond to dominant narratives with voices that went unheard at the time of nation (or province) building, and replace them with narratives grounded in Indigenous belief systems.

Beth Cuthand, Cree, grew up both in Saskatchewan and the Kainai First Nation, Alberta. According to Renate Eigenbrod, Cuthand’s poem, “Four Songs for the Fifth Generation,” spans “four generations of a Cree family,” wherein “the speaker for the first generation laments the vanishing of the buffalo who once gave life to her children” (128). In Cuthand’s poem, the buffalo is placed in relationship with both the people and the land they inhabit:

They were our life the life
 of the prairies
We loved them
 And they loved us. (63)

The break in the line between “our life” and “the life” focuses the connection from a subjective viewpoint from the speaker as Indigenous person, to a more general importance to the land itself. By describing them as “the life of the prairies,” Cuthand positions the buffalo as central to the health of the land, which acknowledges their status of a keystone species that profoundly influences the well-being of other species, both plant and animal. As “the” life of the prairies, the buffalo signals a thriving and healthy ecosystem. Furthermore, Cuthand’s speaker establishes the bond between Indigenous peoples and the buffalo, which affirms the kinship that existed between the buffalo in Cree and Blackfoot cosmology.

The next three lines of the poem establish the way in which the buffalo were part of the land itself. The sheer volume of their numbers, almost unimaginable today, transforms them into a part of the landscape itself:

Sometimes they were so many
they flowed like a river
over the hills into the valleys. (63)

Each line has a similarly placed break, which may suggest the fragmentation that is to be their fate, as the next lines show that their numbers

disappeared: “they are gone.” Ultimately, the speaker tells us of the buffalo’s transformation into “ghosts” as a result of their slaughter.

According to Eigenbrod, in the rest of the poem, now that the buffalo are gone, Cuthand “describes the history of her family... as a process of moving freely, like the buffalo, to fighting ‘for a place in the neighbourhood’” (128). They must do so while suffering the trauma of the loss of their relations, which functions as a legacy for each subsequent generation. In the poem, the brother struggles with the impacts of loss and dislocation: “he had a rage/ that wouldn’t go out” (68). The speaker speaks of her inability to live fully, describing a process of withdrawal: “I just retreated,/ and retreated/ until I couldn’t/ find myself” (68). The trauma that they are living with is a direct result of the severing of the buffalo and the people’s connection with the land. Pueblo scholar Gregory Cajete explains the connection in this way: “Inner kinship with the Earth is an ancient and natural extension of the human psyche and its severance can lead to a deep split in the consciousness of the individual and the group, in addition to social and psychological problems that can ultimately be healed only through reestablishing meaningful ties” (188). Kinship bonds are bonds that are not meant to be broken, and when they sustain damage, it takes many years to repair them.

Dislocation and disruption of kinship relationships are also at the core of Marilyn Dumont’s poem, “Les Animaux.” Dumont is a Métis writer who grew up near Red Deer, Alberta and currently lives in Edmonton. She recently said in an interview with Maja Pasovic that she is moving into a new direction in her writing: “At this stage in my life, I feel compelled to write about the history of the Métis to bring awareness to the injustices and the contributions of the Métis in Canada. What I write, will not please a large part of the public, but a few will support my findings” (Pasovic and Dumont). In “Les Animaux,” Dumont, like Cuthand, laments the loss of the buffalo. However, Dumont’s poem is from the perspective of Gabriel Dumont, the Métis leader. The speaker calls him “Uncle,” following the kinship practices where older male relatives are included in that term out of respect. Furthermore, like Cuthand, Dumont positions Indigenous peoples and the buffalo within a kinship relationship:

the brothers have left us they have moved to another
plain.

She, too, uses spacing to force the reader to pause and consider the connection of family with the buffalo, before moving into the spatial loss described by “another plain.” This technique is reminiscent of oral tradition where Indigenous peoples, unable to fathom that the seemingly limitless buffalo could be reduced to a handful, instead thought the buffalo had moved into a different space: “their great size is swallowed by the bigger prairie / prairie that once seemed like it couldn’t hold all.” The land was seemingly overfilled with buffalo at one time, and now the emptiness looms over everyone.

The speaker’s conception of the land and buffalo’s interconnectivity is disrupted by the loss, resulting in silencing of what was once a symphony of life: “gone, and now the prairie is mute.” By combining the loss of the buffalo with a silencing of the land, Dumont mixes French and English languages with Cree cosmology, creating what Renate Eigenbrod and Jennifer Andrews describe as “a eulogy not only for the buffalo herds displaced by the settlers—‘the new herds’—but also for the potential loss of a linguistic and aesthetic heritage that uniquely combines French and English along with Cree.” The poem is reminiscent of elegy. Brantlinger tells us that the proleptic elegies that mourned the vanishing Indian and even the buffalo can be understood as a “nation-founding genre” (3), and thus, according to Rader, Dumont’s appropriation of this poetic form is an example of the ways Indigenous poets appropriate western forms: “Incorporating aspects of the sonnet, Western rhyme schemes, or the elegy can be seen as a form of counting poetic coup, a symbolic but telling manifestation of triumph” (145). By composing an elegy of the loss of the buffalo, Dumont is pushing her readers to understand the depth of the loss experienced by her ancestors.

The loss is personalized and internalized when Dumont’s speaker tells us that with the loss of the buffalo, “something in us goes too.” Dumont names the loss without being specific as to what exactly the loss entails with the use of “something.” Returning to Dreese’s concept of reterritorialization, we can understand this process as “the claiming of space for oneself and an understanding of the place’s history, its physical constituents, and one’s own psychological reaction to these aspects” (115). The speaker is acknowledging the buffalo’s rightful place on the land by highlighting what happens when it is gone. Adrian Stimson, a Blackfoot artist from Siksika, does similar work in his *Reherd*, where he invites observers to paint small stone buffalo and then place them on an enlarged (and empty) map

of Alberta, simultaneously reminding people of the buffalo's absence while metaphorically restoring them to the land where they belong. Both of these creative works point to the injustice of the colonial exercise of removal of species and peoples who were deemed unfit in the settler project.

Dumont speaks to her motivation for writing poems like "Les Animaux" as follows: "I recognize that I write about historical injustices not just for myself, but for generations that came before me and those that come after me" (Pasovic and Dumont). By speaking in the voice of an ancestor who was directly affected by the loss, Dumont brings the past into the light of the present. She also reminds those of us living in the present that there is something integral missing from the land, perhaps a fact we have not considered before. According to LaRoque, Indigenous writers like Dumont "not only retrieve our histories and experiences, a process that is both necessary and painful, but they also collect and thread together our scattered parts and so nurture our spirits and rebuild our cultures" ("Reflections" 152). While the rebuilding occurs outside of Dumont's poem, the injustices and the loss are acknowledged.

Louise Halfe's book-length poem *Blue Marrow* also acknowledges historical injustices, with the understanding that this acknowledgement is a necessary part of recovery of Indigenous ways of knowing. Halfe was born on the Saddle Lake First Nation and went to residential school at Blue Quills in St. Paul. In an article co-written with archaeologist Ernie Walker, Halfe explains her process and the ways in which language becomes a metonym for colonial struggle: "Through dreams, ceremony, and the recollection of memory, my community continues to battle the rift between our Native tongue and the foreigner's language. ... There are times when community would rather express itself in the safety of the drum, song, and dance, its skeletal wounds often too penetrating" (Walker and Halfe 6). The wounds may be penetrating, but Halfe does not shy away from exposing the wounds themselves, or what caused them. LaRoque says Halfe's poetry "takes us to the marrow of shadows and light that humans are—she lifts the rocks and makes us look at what is under there" ("Reflections" 169). By lifting the rocks that scatter across the prairie (and Alberta) landscape like a literary archaeologist, Halfe reveals a history of death that is the underbelly of settlement, a history that many would prefer to remain covered.

Halfe's speaker begins by invoking her many Grandmothers, women who were not named by colonial history and who are her ancestors, waiting

to be called. She names each Grandmother and invites her to be a part of this ceremony of revelation and recovery of stories. Azalea Barriese and Susan Gingell, in “Listening to Bones that Sing: Orality, Spirituality, and Female Kinship in Louise Halfe’s *Blue Marrow*,” determine that the focus on female kin “animates the retrieval of female stories from the colonially imposed silence, thus recuperating Cree women’s power as the life-giving force acknowledged in her people’s oral creation stories and other forms of oral history ...” (70). Halfe repopulates the literary landscape with these women’s stories and voices in order to tell us how colonization shaped the land once buffalo and other peoples had been erased and silenced.

The primary speaker is identified as the “Keeper of Stories” and is bestowed the responsibility of both telling and caring for these women’s narratives. Jenny Kerber reminds us that “[o]ne cannot be a good caretaker of the stories of the ancestors without also being a good caretaker of the land from which they come” (136), and this includes listening to the voices from the non-human beings. A ceremony begins where voices that have been silenced are asked to speak: “Voices / filled with bird calls, snorting buffalo, kicking bears, mountain goats” (Halfe 17). The animals and birds from all directions and from different lands come together to be heard once again. It is a painful process, because the stories that need to be told are stories of genocide, theft, and erasure. However, the speaker ends the passage with instructions to the rest of us: “Listen to the bones” (18).

As we listen to what the bones of both humans and animals have to say, the bones release a litany of historic injustices against women’s bodies and subsequently, against Indigenous peoples as whole, ending with the following:

The land weeps. I am choking, choking.
The buffalo are a mountain of bones.
My son is shot for killing their cow. (19)

The land is a witness to the atrocities that come with colonization and grieves alongside the people. The buffalo, once relatives and livelihood tied together to sustain life, transform the land with their death, as their bones create new silhouettes on the landscape. Halfe’s Grandmothers also reveal the ways in which the buffalo’s death resulted in starvation for the people. In their hunger and desperation to keep their children from dying, men

Eigenbrod suggests that the chorus “does not really conclude the poem but, rather, creates a new beginning: the song of the future generations” (129). The fifth song belongs to the next generation, the future. The pounded earth under the buffalo herd’s hooves is still animated with their spirits, even if the buffalo are no longer able to nourish the people with their bodies. Indigenous philosopher George Tinker describes it this way: “Like humans, each buffalo has its own life spirit—that is, a spirit that is given to it at the moment of its conception. That spirit is indestructible and, as with any species, including humans, survives even the physical death of the animal” (116). The heartbeats, repeated twice, remind us that life has continued on the land through ceremony.

Similarly, Halfe evokes the renewal through her mention of the Ghost Dance at the end of the passage:

I will not lose my Pipe.
This holy war I stitch to my dress.
This Skull Dance, this Ghost Dance. (21)

The Ghost Dance, begun in the 1880s in the United States as a response to the devastation wrought by colonization, was performed to return life to the way it was before contact, including the return of the buffalo, so life would be renewed. The Keeper of Stories remembers its intent. By stating she will not lose her pipe, she is claiming a ground of battle in order to fight for the stories and the peoples’ future on the lands they know as home.

The stories held within the poetry of Cuthand, Dumont, and Halfe are brought to the page in an effort to bring healing to a people and a land that have been under assault for the past two centuries. As Warren Cariou states, “If they heal, it is through bearing witness, speaking the truth of their pain, their people’s pain, and the legacy of violence that underlies the history of prairie settlement” (732). The violence left little untouched, and certain species such as the buffalo are only beginning to recover. By engaging with this kind of work, Albertans and Canadians in general can contribute by ending the denial and the silencing of these narratives. And by listening to the messages embedded in the work, readers may also gain insight into how life can continue on this land in sustainable ways through the honouring of kinship roles and responsibilities. The poetry of these three women draw in the teachings that have survived in order to

give space to grieve, remember, and honour those who lost their lives, but whose spirits have survived to provide guidance. Indigenous geographies, rather than functioning like a closed categorization, can be used to view the ways in which Indigenous poetic voices, despite violence and silencing, express how the land and its inhabitants continue to live in kinship with one another.

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