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# “THEY REGARD THEIR PASSING AS WAKAN”: INTERPRETING WESTERN SIOUX EXPLANATIONS FOR THE BISON’S DECLINE

JEFFREY OSTLER

*This essay considers Lakota and Nakota thought about the decline of the bison and their possible return through the Ghost Dance. The author emphasizes the difficulties in interpreting Native thought, while arguing that Indians had multiple views that changed over time and were not always incommensurable with western understandings.*

WITHIN THE BRIEF SPAN of a few decades, the vast bison herds of the Great Plains were all but destroyed. The Native people of this region lost a critical source of food, clothing, and shelter, as well as something vital to their culture. In an unprecedented crisis, Indians were forced to ask new questions: Why were the buffalo disappearing? What, if anything, could be done to prevent further decline? Once they were gone, could they return?

After visiting the Pine Ridge reservation in the early 1900s, photographer/ethnographer Edward S. Curtis explained how the Oglala Sioux understood the decline of the buffalo. “So sudden was the[ir] disappearance,” Curtis wrote, “that the Sioux regard their passing as *wakan*, mysterious. The old men still ask what became of them, and nothing can convince them that the herds have passed forever.”<sup>1</sup> Written for an audience of Americans and Europeans, Curtis’s account of Indian thought conveyed a strong sense of a worldview that differed radically from his and his audience’s. Westerners would not have described the passing of the buffalo as “mysterious,” or, to use

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<sup>1</sup> Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA, 1908), 5. Curtis spent a few weeks at Pine Ridge in 1905 and 1907, where his main contact was Red Hawk. Barbara A. Davis, *Edward S. Curtis: The Life and Times of a Shadow Catcher* (San Francisco, 1985), 41, 50–2.

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another possible translation of *wakan*, “incomprehensible.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, they would have talked about laws of historical development and offered a “logical” historical explanation, citing a combination of factors such as the expansion of railroads onto the Great Plains, technological advances in firearms, the emergence of a market for buffalo hides, the greed of hunters, and government policy.<sup>3</sup> Nor would westerners have thought that the bison’s passing was reversible. Presumably, it was Curtis himself who tried to convince the Sioux that the herds had passed forever. Yet, by his account, the “old men” of Pine Ridge thought in very different ways and refused to concur.

The Oglala leader, Red Cloud, was still living when Curtis visited Pine Ridge. Interestingly, Red Cloud had once offered an explanation of the bison’s decline that westerners at the time would have found fairly familiar. “The land of the Dakotas was once large and covered with buffalo and grass,” he told a U. S. commission in 1878. When whites first came “we fed and clothed them.” But more whites “poured into our country.” They “began to divide up our land and tell us what part they would give us.” They “kill[ed] off the buffalo and [brought] starvation upon us and our children.”<sup>4</sup> Red Cloud’s explanation—whites had killed the buffalo—would not have seemed mysterious to a western audience.

This essay stresses that Indian modes of thought were different from *and* similar to those of westerners. Historians and anthropologists have stressed the “otherness” of Indian thought about the decline of the buffalo and their possible return. According to scholars, when scarcity occurred, it was because the buffalo had returned to the earth, their place of origin, because they had been offended by whites or Indians themselves. A corollary of these distinctively Native ideas about cause and effect was that buffalo were capable of being regenerated.<sup>5</sup> While this emphasis on difference stems

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Buechel, S.J., comp., *A Dictionary—Oie Wowapi Wan of Teton Sioux*, ed. Paul Manhart, S.J. (Pine Ridge, SD, 1983), 525. See also Raymond J. DeMallie, Jr. and Robert H. Lavenda, “*Wakan*: Plains Siouan Concepts of Power,” in *The Anthropology of Power: Ethnographic Studies from Asia, Oceania, and the New World*, ed. Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams (New York, 1977), 153–65.

<sup>3</sup> Implicit in Curtis’s project of using the camera and pen to document a “vanishing race” was the view that “primitive” races were inevitably destined to disappear according to laws of social evolution. See Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy* (1982; reprint, Lawrence, 1991), 208–9; Christopher M. Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (New York, 1982), 48–61. The standard account of the bison’s decline was William T. Hornaday, “The Extermination of the American Bison,” in *Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, 1887*, House misc. doc. 600, pt. 2, 50<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 2852, 367–534.

<sup>4</sup> *The Council Fire and Arbitrator* 7 (October 1884): 140.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond J. DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account,” *Pacific Historical Review* 51 (November 1982): 385–405; Richard White, “Animals and Enterprise,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York, 1994), 245; Dan Flores, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850,” *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 485.

from an important commitment to cultural relativism as opposed to an ethnocentric universalism, it is necessary to realize that Indian thought did not always follow a fundamentally other cultural logic. As David Murray observes, "we must . . . have a view of translation and communication which can take us between the Scylla of universalism, and the Charybdis of absolute relativism."<sup>6</sup>

An attempt to reconstruct Plains Indian thought about the decline of the buffalo presents several difficulties. In addition to the challenge of negotiating claims of difference and universalism, there are problems with the sources. This essay considers evidence from Teton Sioux (Lakota) and Yankton and Yanktonai Sioux (Nakota) sources (collectively referred to in this essay as "western Sioux"), supplemented with material from other Plains tribes.<sup>7</sup> These sources fall into three categories: Indian statements recorded at the time, observations made by U. S. officials and other non-Indians, and Indian statements reflecting oral tradition and individual opinions recorded by early twentieth-century ethnographers. Indian voices in these sources are highly mediated, not only by the translation process but also by the context in which they were recorded. In situations where ethnographers were trying to find out about Indian cosmological beliefs, for example, they recorded Indian responses without noting the questions that prompted them. Investigators also failed to realize that Indian responses were often shaped by Indian perceptions of what outsiders wanted to hear. They often reported their findings in ways that smoothed over contradictions or elided gaps. In addition, Indian informants were removed in time from the cultural and religious patterns of earlier decades. Even Indian comments on buffalo scarcity during the time the crisis was occurring were shaped by strategic considerations and hardly exhausted a speaker's views on the subject. Despite the fact that the sources do not permit the

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<sup>6</sup> David Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington, IN, 1991), 3. For another useful effort to find a route between universalism and "oppositional sets like West/Rest, Us/Them, anthropological/biological, historical/mythical," see Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley, 1992), 15. An influential work that perpetuates such dualisms is Calvin Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York, 1987); a fine critical discussion of Martin's notion of an Indian "mythical" view of the world versus a western "historical" view is in Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of the Historical Imagination: Narrating the Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley, 1997), 288-93. The tension between universalism and difference in American Indian studies is part of a larger set of debates in social and cultural theory in a variety of disciplines. See Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Cambridge, MA, 1995). A celebrated contemporary debate pivoting on cultural difference vs. similarity involves Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of James Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, 1992), and Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985). Sahlins's reply is *How "Natives" Think, About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> The Teton, Yankton, and Yanktonais are three of seven Dakota or Sioux groups that comprise the *Oceti Sakowin* (Seven Council Fires). The other four, together known as the Santees, are the Mdewakanton, Wahpeton, Sisseton, and Wahpekute. The Teton are further divided into seven groups: Oglala, Sicangu (Brulé), Hunkpapa, Minneconjou, Sicasapa (Blackfoot), Oohenunpa (Two Kettle), and Itazipco (Sans Arcs).

construction of an account free of uncertainty, however, it is possible to sketch some of the contours of Native thought.

In considering the evidence, two things become apparent. First, the cultural matrix of the western Sioux did not offer a single, immediately obvious way to comprehend the problem of decline. Faced with an unprecedented crisis, it is not surprising that the Sioux offered divergent accounts of why the buffalo were declining and whether they might return. The absence of a unitary response underscores that culture, in John and Jean Comaroff's formulation, "never constitutes a closed, entirely coherent system. Quite the contrary: culture always contains within it polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images, and actions."<sup>8</sup>

Second, as the crisis deepened, Sioux spokesmen offered explanations that were to a great extent comprehensible within the discourse of Americans. In the early 1800s, the western Sioux probably did not imagine that the buffalo would become extinct. But in contrast to the view of some scholars that Indian and western ways of understanding the world differed to such an extent that Indians did not grasp the possibility of extinction until it had almost occurred, Native thought often changed rapidly under new circumstances.<sup>9</sup> In his analysis of eastern Indians' responses to European contact, Bruce Trigger argues that although many Natives initially regarded Europeans as supernatural beings, their "observation and rational evaluation of European behavior" eventually led them to regard Europeans as human beings with distinctive characteristics who could be dealt with like any other foreign group. In a similar way, Indians of the Plains experienced what Trigger calls a "cognitive reorganization."<sup>10</sup> By the 1850s and 1860s, as a result of their own observations—as well as dialogue with Americans, the possibility that the buffalo would be gone forever was all too real.

Great Plains bison populations began a sharp and steady decline in the early 1840s.<sup>11</sup> To some extent, the Sioux response to this crisis was shaped by their existing knowledge about buffalo, which had been acquired over the course of long experience.

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<sup>8</sup> John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992), 27. See also James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 230–6.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond J. DeMallie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century," in *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (Norman, 1987), 32; DeMallie, "Lakota Ghost Dance," 390–1; Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 485; Dan Flores, "The Great Contraction: Bison and Indians in Northern Plains Environmental History," in *Legacy: New Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, ed. Charles E. Rankin (Helena, 1996), 17; William A. Dobak, "Killing the Canadian Buffalo, 1821–1881," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1996): 49–51.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations," *Journal of American History* 77 (March 1991): 1210.

<sup>11</sup> Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, 1995), 51–7; Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 480–3.

When Europeans first encountered the Sioux in the late seventeenth century they were living in what is now Minnesota. Opportunities to hunt beaver for trade and bison herds for subsistence led one of the seven Sioux subdivisions, the Tetons (Lakotas), to move gradually westward.<sup>12</sup> By 1770, they were living south of the Great Bend of the Missouri River, where they were under the shadow of the more powerful river tribes, the Arikaras, Mandans, and Hidatsas. The Tetons had acquired horses and grown increasingly dependent on buffalo. During the same period the Yanktons and Yanktonais also migrated west. By the late eighteenth century, the Yanktons were living in southeastern South Dakota and northern Iowa, and Yanktonais were in the area between the James River and the Missouri in eastern North Dakota. These groups also relied on buffalo, although to a lesser extent than the Tetons.<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1700s, the Tetons broke the power of the river tribes, who were severely weakened by smallpox, and moved into the rich buffalo territory west of the Missouri. There they waged war against Kiowas, Crows, Shoshones, Assiniboines, and Skidi Pawnees to gain access to new hunting areas. By 1850, the Lakotas along with their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies controlled much of the vast region between the Platte and the Yellowstone.<sup>14</sup>

As they moved westward the buffalo became ever more entwined in the culture of the Lakota Sioux. The close connection between the Lakotas and *pte oyate kin* (the buffalo nation) is evident in the Lakota story of the coming of the White Buffalo Calf Woman to the Sans Arcs band.<sup>15</sup> The story begins with a time of famine: the Sans Arcs, moving westward, are unable to find buffalo. Two young men, sent out to find game, encounter a beautiful young woman, who explains that she has been sent by the Buffalo tribe with a message for their people. One of the two lusts after the woman and is destroyed. The other returns to the camp, tells the people what he has seen, and they prepare to welcome the visitor. The next day the woman appears at sunrise carrying a pipe. After being welcomed by the chief, she takes the pipe and explains that *Wakan Tanka* (God) has smiled upon everyone present, as all belong to one family. She, in fact, is their sister. The woman then explains that she represents the Buffalo tribe and that the pipe she carries is a gift from them to the people. After instructing the women, children, and men of their duties and obligations, she lights the pipe and offers it to the earth and the four directions. She puffs the pipe, passes it to the chief

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<sup>12</sup> Gary Clayton Anderson, "Early Dakota Migration and Intertribal War: A Revision," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (January 1980): 17–36; Richard White, "The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of American History* 65 (September 1978): 321–2.

<sup>13</sup> White, "Winning of the West," 322–3; James H. Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnohistory and the John K. Bear Winter Count," *Plains Anthropologist* 21 (August 1976): 5–6; George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (Norman, 1937), 6–19.

<sup>14</sup> White, "Winning of the West," 324–43; Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 19–68.

<sup>15</sup> Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture* (1918; reprint, Lincoln, 1992), 63–6.

and then leaves. As the people watch her depart, the woman suddenly becomes a white buffalo calf.

The story of the White Buffalo Calf Woman powerfully reveals the important place of bison in western Sioux cosmology. Lakotas and Nakotas regarded buffalo as spiritual beings that had originated within the earth and were relatives of humans.<sup>16</sup> Like the many other *wakan* beings of the world (including animals, birds, insects, stones, and thunder), buffalo were capable of appearing and speaking to people in visions or dreams. It was possible for someone who had dreamed of buffalo to call on them for assistance in hunting or healing (less often for success in war).<sup>17</sup> Buffalo also set a moral example. As Ella Deloria explains, "He was the embodiment of sacrifice that others might live. He came when they were starving; he set the example of hospitality; he was a host to a whole nation."<sup>18</sup>

The story also suggests how Lakotas understood scarcity. The White Buffalo Calf Woman reminds the male hunters that the necessities of life come from the "earth below, the sky above, and the four winds." Yet receiving these necessities is not automatic. "Whenever you do anything wrong against these elements," she instructs, "they will always take some revenge upon you." Therefore, "You should reverence them. Offer sacrifices through this pipe. When you are in need of buffalo meat, smoke this pipe and ask for what you need and it shall be granted you."<sup>19</sup> Scarcity, then, was explained as a consequence of people offending "the elements." Abundance could be secured through ritual. Not simply a mechanical activity, ritual efficacy required adherence to moral values.<sup>20</sup>

Before they left the woodlands, the Tetons, Yanktons, and Yanktonais no doubt employed rituals to locate buffalo and other game.<sup>21</sup> As they moved west they would have discarded and modified some of these rituals, borrowed some from other tribes, and developed new ones. Non-Indian travelers occasionally saw evidence of

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<sup>16</sup> James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln, 1980), 124, 144; James Owen Dorsey, "A Study of Siouan Cults," in *Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, DC, 1894), 476–7; James R. Walker, *Lakota Myth*, ed. Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln, 1983), 21.

<sup>17</sup> For accounts of buffalo visions from several Plains tribes see Lee Irwin, *The Dream Seekers: Native American Visionary Traditions on the Great Plains* (Norman, 1994), 43–7; for the western Sioux, see Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 173–6; Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 68, 153, 281; Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* (Norman, 1964), 293.

<sup>18</sup> Ella C. Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (1944; reprint, Vermillion, SD, 1992), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> See Little Wound's statement that people could offend buffalo by stinginess in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> In the 1830s, Joseph Nicollet noted that the eastern Sioux made ritual uses of plants to attract buffalo. Edmund C. Bray and Martha Coleman Bray, trans., *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies: The Expeditions of 1838–39 with Journals, Letters, and Notes on the Dakota Indians* (St. Paul, 1976), 117, 281.

such rituals. Near the mouth of the Cheyenne River in 1811, Henry Brackenridge observed an abandoned Sioux camp where there was a space enclosed with poles. In the middle was a red post and a buffalo head upon a mound of earth. This, fur traders told him, was a "place where an incantation for rendering the buffaloe plenty, had been performed." Twenty-two years later, near Ft. Pierre, Prince Alexander Philip Maximilian observed a pile of buffalo skulls, a "medicine, or charm, contrived by the Indians in order to entice the herds of buffaloes."<sup>22</sup>

Lakotas developed a wealth of practices to locate game, bring game closer, and enable success in the hunt. According to the Oglala George Sword, for example, Lakotas routinely burned buffalo chips "so as to make a smoke." This was because "the spirit of a buffalo remains in dried buffalo chips and it is in the smoke from them. The spirit goes to *Wakan Tanka*, and pleases him so that he will help in the chase." Lakotas routinely smoked a pipe before hunting; after a kill, they offered a piece of meat to the spirit of the animal in propitiation.<sup>23</sup> Other means to locate animals were also available. In the early 1900s, Siyaka, a Teton-Yanktonai, recalled that a man named Crooked Foot once sent a sacred stone to look for buffalo. After a time the stone returned; Crooked Foot then questioned it "concerning the location of the buffalo." Acting on this information, the tribe "found the herd as he had indicated." Some practices were evidently used in situations of acute scarcity. According to Siyaka, in a time of hunger a medicine man (*wicasa wakan*) painted a buffalo skull with red and blue stripes and placed it near a filled pipe on a bed of sage. He then sang a song. The buffalo skull "turned into a real buffalo and called others" through the song. After this ceremony "the buffalo came near the camp and thus the famine was relieved."<sup>24</sup>

Indians did not rely solely on ritual to locate buffalo. They also employed what from a western perspective were quite ordinary methods. In describing a typical *wanasapi* (communal buffalo hunt), Siyaka focused mostly on nonmagical, practical activity. When the elders of a camp decided that a hunt was necessary, they chose young men "to go and search for the buffalo." In addition to "physical ability and general equipment" those chosen knew "the topography of the country and . . . the ways of the buffalo." Before setting out, the young men performed a ritual in which they circled a stick that signified an enemy or a buffalo, but their subsequent efforts to locate buffalo depended on judgments about the likeliest place where they might be found.<sup>25</sup> Success, then, required an empirical knowledge of the land and animals

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<sup>22</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, vol. 6 (Cleveland, 1904), 109; Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, vol. 22 (Cleveland, 1906), 318.

<sup>23</sup> Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 77; Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 194.

<sup>24</sup> Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 229-30, 444. Wilson D. Wallis, "The Canadian Dakota," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 41, pt. 1 (New York, 1947), 53-64, offers a detailed account of rituals used by the Canadian Sioux to locate buffalo.

<sup>25</sup> Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 439-40.



acquired through careful observation and experience. Both ritual and empirical dimensions of Sioux practice are important. Aaron McGaffey Beede, an early twentieth-century missionary, stressed that the Sioux were “keen observers” and that it would be mistaken to “investigate the mythological aspect of old Indian thought merely and write down this as the sum-total or even the chief element in Indian opinions.”<sup>26</sup> This does not mean that practical action existed outside or in opposition to the cosmological or ritual realm. Rather, such action was embedded in a cultural system.

In the 1840s and 1850s, bison populations in Sioux territory began to diminish. The most serious decline occurred to the east along the Missouri River and to the south along the Platte.<sup>27</sup> The western Sioux continued to use ritual means to locate or attract buffalo. Perhaps reflecting a time of acute scarcity, a Yanktonai winter count records 1842 as the year when Drum Owner “called the buffalo by performing the Buffalo calling ceremony.” Sans Arcs and Minneconjou winter counts show that Indians “made medicine” to attract buffalo around the same time (1843–1844).<sup>28</sup>

As increasing numbers of migrants traveled through Sioux territory in the late 1840s and 1850s, Indians began to identify a new threat to the buffalo: Americans.<sup>29</sup> In the early twentieth century, High Bear, an Oglala, said that “[w]hen the tribe first mingled with the whites” the *Cante Tinza* (Brave Hearts) society tried to minimize contact with whites. “If the [Brave Hearts] discovered anyone going among the white people, they would intercept him and kill him and his horse. They were afraid that the smell of coffee and bacon (foreign smells) would scare the buffalo and make them stay

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<sup>26</sup> Aaron McGaffey Beede, “Western Sioux Cosmology,” Aaron McGaffey Beede Papers, Elwyn G. Robinson Department of Special Collections, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, 5.

<sup>27</sup> John C. Frémont, “A Report of the Exploring Expedition to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–44,” in *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, vol. 1, ed. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence (Urbana, 1970), 493; [Annual] Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1853 (hereafter ARCIA), House ex. doc. 1, 33<sup>d</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 710, 353, 368; ARCIA, 1854, House ex. doc. 1, 33<sup>d</sup> Cong., 2<sup>d</sup> sess., serial 777, 290–1; ARCIA, 1855, House ex. doc. 1, 34<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 840, 396–7, 403; West, *The Way to the West*, 51–7.

<sup>28</sup> Howard, “Yanktonai Ethnohistory,” 50–1; Garrick Mallery, “Pictographs of the North American Indians—A Preliminary Paper,” in *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1882–83*, House misc. doc. 42, 48<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>d</sup> sess., serial 2973, 93–4, 99, 118–9.

<sup>29</sup> Much of the recent literature on the causes of bison decline contests the view that Americans were overwhelmingly responsible and instead focuses on Indian overhunting and environmental factors such as disease and drought. See West, *The Way to the West*, 51–83; Elliott West, *Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, 1998), 90–2; Flores, “Bison Ecology, Bison Diplomacy,” 465–85; Dobak, “Killing the Canadian Buffalo,” 33–52. In reporting western Sioux statements stressing American responsibility, this essay does not deny that they understate Indian hunting as a contributing factor, although my view is that some of the literature goes too far in blaming Plains Indians for the problems they faced in the 1840s–1860s. For the purpose of this essay, however, my aim is solely to understand Indian thought about the bison’s decline independently of the actual causes.

away."<sup>30</sup> Whether these beliefs and practices in fact date from initial contact or whether they emerged later, by the 1850s Oglalas maintained that buffalo were frightened by the smell of whites. In 1859, the Indian agent at the Upper Platte agency, Thomas Twiss, reported that "the Indians entertain a superstitious belief that the buffalo will not return to the same place again where he may have scented the white man."<sup>31</sup> Although Twiss dismissed this view, non-Indians recorded instances of bison being frightened by the scent of humans and many held that bison feared a non-Indian's scent more than an Indian's.<sup>32</sup>

Indians also contended that Americans frightened buffalo in other ways and also killed them. In 1845, agent Thomas H. Harvey reported that the Sioux "complain that the buffalo are wantonly killed and scared off."<sup>33</sup> In 1859, Medicine Man, an Arapaho, lamented the fact that the "white man" was "everywhere." They killed some of the game with their rifles, he said, and "the smoke of their Camp fires scares the rest away." Medicine Man's people were no longer able to find game and their "old people & little Children are hungry for many days, & some die. . . ."<sup>34</sup>

At least some Sioux feared that the increasing shortage of game portended a day when the buffalo would completely disappear. In 1859, Twiss reported a recent speech of an unidentified Lakota chief. Thirty years earlier, this chief traveled east to Lake Michigan, along the way encountering very few whites. Although he had never retraced his steps after that journey, he was aware that "whites cover all these lands . . . and also the lands of the Poncas, Omahas, and Pawnees." Noting that Americans had recently discovered gold on the South Platte and that the Arapahos and Cheyennes "have no longer any hunting grounds," this leader feared that "before our children are grown up, we shall have no more game."<sup>35</sup>

Other evidence indicates that some Lakotas thought the buffalo might eventually disappear. In 1931, Oglala holy man Black Elk related that:

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<sup>30</sup> Clark Wissler, "Societies and Ceremonial Associations in the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 11, pt. 1 (New York, 1912), 9.

<sup>31</sup> ARCIA, 1859, Senate ex. doc. 2, 36<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 1023, 497.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Gilbert Roe, *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in Its Wild State* (Toronto, 1951), 133–5, 197; John James Audubon and John Bachman, *The Quadrapeds of North America*, vol. 2 (New York, 1854), 47; Tom McHugh, *The Time of the Buffalo* (New York, 1972), 149; F. A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis, 1912), 47.

<sup>33</sup> ARCIA, 1845, Senate doc. 1, 29<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 470, 536.

<sup>34</sup> LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, eds., *Relations with the Indians of the Plains, 1857–1861* (Glendale, CA, 1959), 178.

<sup>35</sup> ARCIA, 1859, 498; summary of a council, 18 Sept. 1858, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824–81, (National Archives Microfilm Publications), microcopy 234, roll 890.

A long time ago (about seventy years) there was an Indian medicine man, Drinks Water, a Lakota, who foretold in a vision that the four-leggeds were going back into the earth. And he said in the future all over the universe there shall be a spider's web woven all around the Sioux and then when it shall happen you shall live in gray houses (meaning these dirt-roof houses in which we are living now), but that will not be the way of your life and religion and so when this happens, alongside of those gray houses you shall starve to death.<sup>36</sup>

Black Elk's telling of this prophecy was possibly influenced by knowledge of the events of his lifetime. Combined with other evidence, however, the account supports the conclusion that in the 1850s and 1860s some Lakotas recognized the possibility of extinction.

All too rapidly, Drinks Water's prophecy began to be fulfilled. In the 1860s, bison began to disappear altogether from many parts of western Sioux territory. By the mid-1870s, only small, isolated herds remained, and in 1877, lack of game forced the last militants to surrender.<sup>37</sup> During these years, many western Sioux linked the decline of buffalo populations to mounting American pressures: the growing numbers of overlanders and miners, the coming of the railroad, and the soldiers that followed.

As the Sioux and their allies resisted the American invasion, the U. S. government sent several commissions to make treaties with militants and nonmilitants. In the course of these negotiations, Sioux spokesmen frequently complained to commissioners of specific American actions that had caused buffalo scarcity. In 1865, for example, Lone Horn, a Minneconjou leader, protested that the "Great Father" had "done wrong" by sending "white people into my country, who are fighting my people and scaring all the game off of my land." The Brulé leader Spotted Tail contended in 1867 that "[t]he country in which we live is cut up by the white men, who drive away all the game. That is the cause of our troubles." Man that Walks Under the Ground, an Oglala, protested that the "iron roads have scared off all our game."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond J. DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln, 1984), 290.

<sup>37</sup> ARCIA, 1864, House ex. doc. 1, 38<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>d</sup> sess., serial 1220, 404–5; ARCIA, 1868, House ex. doc. 1, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 1366, 651–2. Although Oglalas and Brulés continued to hunt along the Republican River until the early 1870s (Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 193; George E. Hyde, *Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brulé Sioux* [Norman, 1961], 227, 240), it was to the northwest in the Belle Fourche, Little Missouri, and Powder River drainages that game remained plentiful through the mid-1870s. *Letter from the Secretary of the Interior . . .*, Senate ex. doc. 52, 44<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 1664, 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Proceedings of a Board of Commissioners to Negotiate a Treaty or Treaties with the Hostile Indians of the Upper Missouri* (Washington, DC, 1865), 19; *Papers Relating to Talks and Councils Held with the Indians in Dakota and Montana Territories in the Years 1866–1869* (Washington, DC, 1910), 49. In all likelihood the word interpreters translated as "scare away" and "drive away" was the same, *habya*. Buechel, comp., *Dictionary*, 191. The word translated "Great Father" was *Tunkasila* ("grandfather").

One of the most interesting recorded statements on the subject was made by the Hunkpapa Black Moon. During an 1868 council with Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, acting as a government emissary, Black Moon arose "with pipe in hand," offered it to DeSmet, and spoke:

Our country is desolate and impoverished by a cruel war, which was commenced by the Cheyenne and Eastern Sioux. It was forced upon us, and now, when we travel over our country, we frequently see red spots, but they are not the red spots of the slaughtered buffalo, but of your fellow comrades, or the White man. Our country was full of game but since the war the animals seem to detest their native haunts and I believe it is [in] consequence of the smell of human blood that they are driven away. Again, the Whites have been cutting our country up with roads, and building forts at various places. They frequently and unkindly put our people in prison for little or no cause. They cut our timber, ruin our country with impunity.<sup>39</sup>

It is possible to read Black Moon's words literally as indicating that bison were repelled by the odor of blood in particular spots and had therefore left the general region. But Black Moon's image of buffalo driven away by the smell of human blood was also a powerful metaphor.

In addressing DeSmet, Black Moon wanted to make peace with the U. S. on the best possible terms. Black Moon's blaming of the war on others (the Cheyenne and eastern Sioux) coupled with his identification of spilled blood as that of "the White man" suggested to the Americans that they, like Black Moon's people, had been pulled into a war they did not want and had suffered for it. This established a common ground for peace. Not only was American blood on the ground, however, the buffalo smelled it and accordingly had been "driven away." Through the pivotal image of the smell of human blood driving buffalo away, Black Moon shifted to an indictment of specific American actions. In coming to Lakota country and engaging in war, Americans had damaged the buffalo's "native haunts." Why did the buffalo now detest the places they once had loved? It may not have been the odor of the particular spots where American bodies had stained the ground. American blood was everywhere and its offense general. It was they who had ruined the land and its game. Drawing on cultural knowledge about buffalo, Black Moon crafted a synecdoche for the general destruction wrought by the United States' invasion. His message was clear: if the Americans made a just peace, the smell of blood would be removed, and the buffalo would return.

At times U. S. commissioners contested the charge that American actions adversely affected game populations. For example, General William Tecumseh Sherman argued that travel along the Bozeman Trail did not "disturb the buffalo, nor does it destroy the elk and antelope." In other instances, commissioners admitted that Native

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<sup>39</sup> Rev. Louis Pfaller, O.S.B., ed., "The Galpin Journal: Dramatic Record of an Odyssey of Peace," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 18 (Spring 1968): 18.

indictments had merit. When Lone Horn complained about the Great Father sending soldiers who scared away the game, General William S. Curtis assured him: "We will scare the buffalo as little as we can."<sup>40</sup>

Despite this short-term assurance, U. S. officials routinely argued that the day would come when the bison would be no more. Speaking to Brulé chiefs in 1865, General William H. Sibley contended that "[t]he time has come when your game must necessarily be killed off" and that they would soon "have to live like those other Indians who have settled upon reservations and gone to planting corn. . . ."<sup>41</sup> Many Native spokesmen rejected commissioners' assertions that the buffalo were doomed to extinction. However, the reason for this was not that the Lakota and American "systems of belief" differed to such an extent that their conversations resulted in a "complete failure to communicate." It is true that Lakotas held very different views about the buffalo than did Americans. Lakotas believed that the buffalo had originated from within the earth and that the Lakota people, the buffalo, and the land were closely connected. However, the identity of the people, the buffalo, and the land was neither so unitary nor static as to mean that "while the people lived and the land existed, talk of extinction of the buffalo was meaningless to the Lakotas."<sup>42</sup>

In the late 1860s, Sioux leaders drew upon their knowledge of historical trends over broad geographical areas to foresee the possibility of extinction. Unlike the commissioners, however, who embraced the ideological perspective that laws of historical development decreed that bison (like Indians) were destined to vanish, many Sioux leaders held a more contingent view that the buffalo did not have to disappear. Having identified American actions as the cause of decline, it was only logical for Indians to argue that if Americans reversed those actions, bison would flourish once again. In 1868, Iron Shell, a Brulé chief, sensibly observed that if Euro-Americans returned to the forests "all the game will come back and we will have plenty to eat."<sup>43</sup>

Like Black Moon, other leaders linked the return of the buffalo to the end of war. Gut Fat, a Hunkpapa, stated in 1865 that game had become so scarce that his people felt they had to "save" what little was left. "But when I heard that you had arrived here," he told U. S. commissioners, "I thought I would come and see you, and hear from you that you were going to return us all the buffalo as it used to be. . . ." How would the commissioners do this? The Two Kettle leader Two Lances informed the commissioners that after they had "washed out all the blood that is on the land I think that the game by which we live—the buffalo, the elk, and all the rest—will become plenty again. . . ."<sup>44</sup> Several others used the metaphor of washing the blood from the land to call upon the U. S. to make a just peace.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Papers Relating to Talks and Councils*, 51; *Proceedings of a Board of Commissioners*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> *Proceedings of a Board of Commissioners*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> DeMallie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual," 32.

<sup>43</sup> *Papers Relating to Talks and Councils*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Proceedings of a Board of Commissioners*, 104, 57–8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 81, 83, 105.

The commissioners responded to requests that they return the buffalo by reporting that the Indians “are only too much inclined to regard us as possessed of supernatural powers.”<sup>46</sup> From a Sioux perspective, however, it was not because they were gods that the commissioners could return the buffalo. It was because as spokesmen for the president they had the power to eliminate the American presence in Sioux territory. Indeed, the commissioners’ creation of an Indian belief in the commissioners’ own supernatural power had ideological implications. To use Edward Said’s term, by “orientalizing” Indians as having a wholly other mentality (one of savage superstition), the commissioners were able to evade the fact that what the Indians demanded was perfectly comprehensible within the commissioners’ ways of thinking.<sup>47</sup> In so doing they disguised their own responsibility for the destruction of game and avoided the necessity of having to engage Indian demands. In this way, cultural misunderstanding was a political construction, not an epistemological given.

Interpreting these exchanges as examples of radical cultural difference can obscure the fact that what was decisive in the encounter between the Indians and commissioners was not two mutually incomprehensible epistemes. It is true that the commissioners knew little about the Lakotas’ relationship to *pte oyate kin* and the Indians understood little about Americans’ belief in the inevitability of “progress.” Even so, the commissioners recognized the economic importance of bison to the Plains tribes, and, while they evaded Indian demands that Americans cease being imperialists, it was not because they were incapable of understanding them—rather, they preferred to ignore them. Indians, too, knew something about American intentions and they certainly perceived the threat from U. S. expansion. In the end, however, the conflict between the U. S. and the western Sioux was rooted not so much in cultural incommensurability as in opposing interests and an imbalance of power. What was decisive was that Americans possessed the will and capacity to overrun Sioux territory.

An emphasis on radical cultural difference can lead to other problems. Noting that Plains Indians believed that the buffalo originated within the earth and citing evidence indicating that they thought the earth would continue to produce buffalo in countless numbers, some scholars have argued that the idea of conservation was simply outside the Plains Indians’ worldview.<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, many Plains Indians thought in these ways. However, the statement of Gut Fat that his people were trying to “save”

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<sup>46</sup> ARCIA, 1866, House ex. doc. 1, 39<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>d</sup> sess., serial 1284, 169.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> Flores, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy,” 485; Dobak, “Killing the Canadian Buffalo,” 49–50. These articles cite Richard Irving Dodge, *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years’ Personal Experience among the Red Men of the Great West* (1886; reprint, New York, 1959), 286, that “[e]very Plains Indian firmly believed that the buffalo were produced in countless numbers in a country under the ground. . . .” Undoubtedly Dodge’s observation was based on genuine information. However, his generalizations should be treated with caution. Typical of Americans of the period who claimed to really “know Indians,” Dodge’s display of mastery about Indian religion, customs, and character took the form of a series of essentialist pronouncements.

remaining game, shows that some Indians did recognize the need to conserve an increasingly scarce resource. No Plains tribe implemented a successful policy of conservation; they were forced to compete for a diminishing resource. But this is far from saying that conservation was inherently outside Native modes of thought.

The larger point is that, as Indians observed the emerging crisis, they developed new explanations and strategies. Not surprisingly, they did not comprehend the situation in any single way. Records of the U. S.-Sioux discussions of the late 1860s contain evidence of an explanatory pluralism. While most western Sioux leaders cited specific, reversible actions of Americans as the cause of buffalo scarcity, some spokesmen cited other causes. In 1868, Thunder Bull, a Cuthead Yanktonai, rebutted others by saying, "[I]t is ourselves who ruin our country; not the whites. I know the reason why our game is giving out; it is the big guns that drive our game away." Three days later, Long Mandan, a Two Kettle Lakota, advanced another explanation: "The half breeds from the north stop the buffalo from coming to our country."<sup>49</sup>

These differences of opinion were based in part on observation. Thunder Bull, presumably, had seen his own people using guns to kill buffalo and thought the sound of guns could frighten buffalo.<sup>50</sup> He was not necessarily denying altogether the idea of American responsibility, but he was reminding his people of their complicity in this process.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Long Mandan's reference to the "half breeds from the north" was based on knowledge of the massive buffalo hunts that had been initiated decades earlier by the Métis of the Red River settlement in Manitoba. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Sioux, Ojibwa, and non-Indian traders complained to U. S. officials against Métis hunting.<sup>52</sup> Long Mandan's statement drew on a tradition of Sioux protest that was rooted in historical experience. Thunder Bull's and Long Mandan's views were also influenced by their position and interests. Both men belonged to Sioux bands that had adopted a policy of nonmilitance toward the United States during the 1866–1868 war. On the other hand, many, although not all, who blamed Americans belonged to militant bands.<sup>53</sup>

Indians also disagreed about the inevitability of decline. The statement of the unidentified Lakota who journeyed east in his youth and Drinks Water's prophecy

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<sup>49</sup> *Papers Relating to Talks and Councils*, 98, 105.

<sup>50</sup> Hornaday, "Extermination of the American Bison," 429–31, argues that bison did not learn to fear gunfire until they had almost been exterminated. But ethnographic evidence suggests that Indian hunters tried to avoid frightening animals by approaching them downwind and by taking precautions against making unnecessary noise. Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, 442; Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 200.

<sup>51</sup> Raymond J. DeMallie, "The Sioux in Dakota and Montana Territories: Cultural and Historical Background of the Ogden B. Read Collection," in *Vestiges of a Proud Nation: The Ogden B. Read Northern Plains Indian Collection*, ed. Glenn E. Markoe (Burlington, VT, 1986), 29.

<sup>52</sup> Roe, *North American Buffalo*, 367–413; McHugh, *Time of the Buffalo*, 256–8.

<sup>53</sup> ARCIA, 1869, House ex. doc. 1, pt. 3, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>d</sup> sess., serial 1414, 772–3; ARCIA, 1867, House ex. doc. 1, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>d</sup> sess., serial 1326, 242.

indicate that some Sioux regarded decline as more or less inevitable. Others, as we have seen, maintained that further decline could be averted if the U. S. withdrew from Sioux territory. It is unclear how likely this possibility seemed. Spotted Tail, who had an especially astute sense of American intentions and power, made some statements indicating that he thought the buffalo would disappear. On one occasion he said: “[W]hen the buffaloes are gone we will go upon [a reservation] and try to do as the whites. The Great Father wants us to plant corn—we will then have to do as the Great Father wants us to. Now, we want to live as our fathers have lived on the buffalo and the deer that we now find on our hunting grounds.”<sup>54</sup> However, Spotted Tail’s language did not necessarily imply inevitability, and his use of diplomacy to gain concessions from U. S. officials carried the possibility of retaining sufficient land to allow hunting to continue indefinitely.<sup>55</sup>

The actions of those who advocated armed resistance to U. S. expansion are another indication that many did not regard the demise of the buffalo as inevitable. Sioux militants employed a tightly interwoven mix of material and spiritual practices. They used their knowledge of terrain, gathered information about the movements of the enemy, and skillfully wielded weapons. As with hunting, these “ordinary” activities occurred within a broader cultural context in which Indians called upon the nonhuman powers of the universe for assistance. Warriors relied on the powers of animals that had appeared to them in visions.<sup>56</sup> The Sioux appealed to *Wakan Tanka* for success in war, to provide game, and to preserve their people. In late May 1876, as U. S. soldiers moved into the heart of northern Teton hunting grounds, Sitting Bull prayed to *Wakan Tanka* to provide “wild game animals and have them close enough so my people will have enough food this winter. . . .” He vowed that “[i]f you do this for me I will sun dance two days and two nights and will give you a whole buffalo.” A week later, having sacrificed 50 pieces of flesh from each arm during a Sun Dance, Sitting Bull had a vision of soldiers upside down. He interpreted this to mean that the Indians would soon be victorious over the invading troops. This prophecy enhanced the militants’ confidence and was fulfilled two weeks later at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.<sup>57</sup>

More than most, Sitting Bull continued to hope that his people could hunt buffalo for years to come. In the winter of 1876–1877, army harassment forced many of the militants to surrender. Sitting Bull, however, sought refuge in Canada, where some

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<sup>54</sup> *Papers Relating to Talks and Councils*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> The English translation of Spotted Tail’s words “when the buffaloes are gone” may convey a sense of inevitability; however, the Lakota words did not necessarily carry this meaning. Although it is impossible to tell what words Spotted Tail used, one likely possibility was that he said “*Tohanl tatanka kin taninsnipi kin hehanl akanl yin kte. . . .*” (literally, “when buffalo the disappear then upon [it] we go will”). If so, the hypothetical would have been clearly implied.

<sup>56</sup> For an overview of Sioux warfare, see Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 76–100.

<sup>57</sup> Robert M. Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York, 1993), 137–8 (quotations, 137).



herds remained. In 1878, despite food shortages, Sitting Bull maintained that *Wakan Tanka* would “pity them and send buffalo into the White Mother’s [Queen Victoria] country.”<sup>58</sup> Although one of Sitting Bull’s biographers castigates him for “stubbornly refus[ing] to believe that *Wakantanka* would ever allow the buffalo to vanish,” a less judgmental appraisal would simply note that Lakota history offered support for Sitting Bull’s faith.<sup>59</sup> As a reminder of the coming of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, Sitting Bull often wore a “bunch of shed buffalo hair painted red, fastened on the side of his head.”<sup>60</sup> Through her, *Wakan Tanka* had once taken pity on the Lakotas in a time of great suffering. It was culturally possible for something like this to happen again.

In the end, game shortages forced even Sitting Bull to the reservation. Now the question became, Could the buffalo return? Even before the emergence of the Ghost Dance in 1889, some Lakotas apparently thought ritual might reverse decline. Black Elk’s interviews with John Neihardt suggest an interesting example. When Black Elk was a boy, he experienced a powerful vision. As he grew older, he became troubled about his vision. He sought help from a *wicasa wakan* (medicine man) who advised him to perform portions of the vision for his people. Accordingly, Black Elk staged a series of performances in which he and others dramatized what he had seen, thereby enabling him to activate the vision’s potential powers. One of these, a “buffalo ceremony,” took place on the Pine Ridge reservation in 1884.

In this ceremony, Red Dog, “an old medicine man,” assisted Black Elk to “resemble a buffalo.” Like the buffalo of his vision, Black Elk wore an herb on one side of a horn; on the side of his body was an eagle feather, a symbol of the people feeding on the buffalo. Red Dog also made a buffalo wallow and a road running from north to south with buffalo tracks on either side to represent the vision’s “red road.” As the people walked “buffalo-like” upon this road, they would be “tough” and would flourish. Once these preparations were complete, Red Dog sang a buffalo song and then “made a snorting sound of a buffalo and from his breath was visible red flames.” Black Elk then emerged from a tipi, going “around acting like [a] buffalo,” while another man, One Side, followed him, acting the part of the people.<sup>61</sup>

In relating this ceremony almost 50 years later, Black Elk indicated that its efficacy was manifested through an increase in his powers of healing.<sup>62</sup> The account, however, contains hints that at the time the ceremony was performed it was understood to have the potential to reverse the decline of the buffalo. The ceremony’s imagery—the

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Joseph Manzione, “*I Am Looking to the North for My Life*”: *Sitting Bull, 1876–1881* (Salt Lake City, 1991), 129. The phrase “White Mother” is probably an inaccurate translation. Lakotas referred to Victoria as *Unci* (Grandmother) and Canada as *Unciyapi Tamakoce* (Grandmother’s Land).

<sup>59</sup> Utley, *Lance and the Shield*, 199.

<sup>60</sup> Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, 458.

<sup>61</sup> DeMallie, ed., *Sixth Grandfather*, 240–1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

feather showing the people's dependence on the buffalo—suggests this possibility. A stronger indication is a comment Red Dog made to Black Elk:

Red Dog said: "Boy, you had a great vision, and I know that it is your place to see that the people might walk the good road in a manner satisfactory to all its powers. It is the duty for you to see that the people will lead and walk the right road, because if it is not done, in the future our relatives-like will disappear."<sup>63</sup>

As we have seen, the Lakotas' relationship to the Buffalo nation was grounded in the White Buffalo Calf Woman's instructions about their duties and responsibilities and her gift of the pipe. Proper moral behavior and ritual performance would allow the Lakotas to maintain their close connection with the buffalo. Drawing on these traditions, Red Dog evidently hoped that if Black Elk led the people on the "right road"—that is, if he guided them to fulfill their moral obligations to one another and to perform proper rituals—the animals ("our relatives-like") might not disappear.

Although there is little additional evidence of the use of rituals to restore the buffalo, it would hardly be surprising, given the possibilities Lakota culture offered for the powers of the universe to show pity toward human suffering, to learn that many Lakotas in the 1880s, experimented with ritual in the hope that the buffalo might return. What we do know is that in the late 1880s Lakotas found a way for this to happen. In 1889, having heard of the Paiute prophet Wovoka, one or more Lakota delegations journeyed to Nevada where they learned of his prediction of a cataclysmic event that would remove or destroy whites. There would then be a new world for Indians in which dead ancestors would return and game would be restored. Wovoka also taught Lakotas and representatives of other tribes to perform a round dance, which the Lakotas called *Wana gi Wacipi* (Ghost Dance, or Spirit Dance). By performing this dance the new world would come into being. When the delegates returned home many Lakotas formed Ghost Dance camps where they performed the dance and saw visions of the world to come.<sup>64</sup>

Ethnohistorian Raymond J. DeMallie provides a compelling interpretation of the cultural logic of the Lakota Ghost Dance: "A cornerstone of [the Lakotas'] belief was that both mankind and the buffalo had originated within the earth before they emerged on the surface. When the buffalo became scarce, it was believed that they went back inside the earth because they had been offended, either by Indians or whites. At any given time, this explanation accounted for the scarcity of the buffalo." These premises, DeMallie observes, "allowed for the return of the buffalo. The ghost dance

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>64</sup> James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (1896; Lincoln, 1991), 764–824; Michael Hittman, *Wovoka and the Ghost Dance*, rev. ed. (Lincoln, 1997); "Wanagi Wacipi [Ghost Dance]," in Paul Manhart, S.J., ed., *Lakota Tales and Texts* (Pine Ridge, SD, 1978), 277.

Messiah's promise of a new earth, well stocked with buffalo, was completely consistent with the old Lakota system of cause and effect by which they comprehended the ecology. If the buffalo had been driven back into the earth by the white man, they could be released again by the Messiah.<sup>65</sup>

DeMallie's interpretation offers a valuable corrective to the work of earlier scholars who portrayed the Ghost Dance either as an outbreak of irrational hysteria or, more sympathetically but still ethnocentrically, as a religion analogous to Christianity.<sup>66</sup> The very clarity with which his interpretation illuminates a radically other cultural logic, however, may create the misleading impression that the links in this logical chain were as obvious to all Lakotas at the time as DeMallie makes them for his readers. Yet, the implications of widely-shared cultural understandings of the buffalo were not as straightforward as it might appear from DeMallie's explanation. For one thing, most western Sioux rejected the Ghost Dance, and many who participated regarded it as a highly innovative religious ceremony, the efficacy of which was not immediately obvious and which therefore required investigation.<sup>67</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to map the full range of Lakota responses to the Ghost Dance. It is only possible to explore the implications of non- and provisional participation.

Although there is little direct evidence of the views of nonparticipants, a statement by Pumpkin Seed (Oglala) in June 1889 offers some insight. At a council of Oglalas and a U. S. commission, Pumpkin Seed emphatically rejected the old ways:

If I wanted to talk about what is in the past, I would talk about the buffalo, when we had the buffalo years back. But now I look out for my children and to the future to come, and that is the only thing I put my mind to. . . . I am an Indian, but I don't look back after the buffalo any more at all. Now I look at the ground and I want to raise my children and bring them up that way.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> DeMallie, "Lakota Ghost Dance," 391. Although there is evidence that Lakotas believed the spirits of buffalo returned to the earth, other evidence indicates that Lakotas believed their spirits went to *Wana.gi Yata* (Place of the Spirits) in the heavens. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 71, 123; William K. Powers, *Oglala Religion* (Lincoln, 1975), 53; Ronald Goodman, *Lakota Star Knowledge: Studies in Lakota Stellar Theology*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (Rosebud, SD, 1992), 21–3; Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933; Lincoln, 1978), 198; Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 337–8. It is unclear whether this evidence reveals two different opinions or if Lakotas understood the earth and the heavens to be interconnected. In a telephone conversation Victor Douville of Sinte Gleska University informed me that he and other Lakota scholars are currently studying these matters.

<sup>66</sup> Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven, 1963), exemplifies the former interpretation; Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, the latter.

<sup>67</sup> Fewer than one-half of the Tetons and Yanktonais living at Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, Rosebud, and Pine Ridge reservations participated in the dance. Utley, *Last Days*, 112.

<sup>68</sup> *Report and Proceedings of the Sioux Commission*, Senate ex. doc. 51, 51<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., serial 2682, 112.

Pumpkin Seed's remarks were not directed toward the commissioners but to the two hundred Indians who were present.<sup>69</sup> His words offer a glimpse into a debate that had developed among the Lakotas during the 1880s. Most immediately, this debate was about whether or not to cede additional land. More generally, Lakotas were debating how best to respond to colonialism. Some leaders refused to send their children to school, take up farming, or give up "traditional" dances and religious ceremonies. These leaders often acted as if it might be possible to return to the way of life that U. S. imperialism had destroyed. Others, however, argued for selective cooperation with U. S. initiatives in the hope of turning them to their advantage and minimizing their adverse consequences. Such leaders held the view that Pumpkin Seed expressed: it would be best to adjust to a world without the buffalo. They did not necessarily reject the belief that the spirits of the buffalo had returned to the earth, but they were pessimistic that the animals could return.

Participants themselves varied in their certainty of the Ghost Dance's efficacy. They were attracted to the Ghost Dance for numerous reasons. The prospect of a renewal of the earth and its game populations was one of them, but the hope of being reunited with deceased human relatives was probably stronger.<sup>70</sup> Lakota culture and history indicated that these were real possibilities, but it was unclear if they could be realized. Those like Short Bull and Kicking Bear, who sought out Wovoka and became leaders of the Lakota Ghost Dance, presumably maintained a fervent belief in the coming of the new world. Others, however, were not as sure.

Given Sitting Bull's views, discussed above, that *Wakan Tanka* would continue to provide for his people, one might assume that he would have embraced the Ghost Dance without hesitation. Although Sitting Bull participated in the dance, Robert Utley argues that he must have had doubts about the dance but nonetheless felt a "commanding obligation to himself and [his people] to test the new faith. . . ." In a similar vein, Robert P. Higheagle, who grew up on Standing Rock Reservation, observed in the early 1930s that Sitting Bull "couldn't very well get out of the Ghost Dance craze as the tribe wanted to try it and it was the duty of the chief to listen and try with the people."<sup>71</sup> Although these statements are speculative and it is impossible

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>70</sup> Although this essay isolates the Ghost Dance's promise that game could be restored, Lakota narratives give greater attention to deceased relatives than to the renewal of game populations. "Wanagi Wacipi," in Manhart, ed., *Lakota Tales and Texts*, 277–313. Also, although Sioux values permitted wide latitude for individual choice, individual decisions were strongly influenced by group allegiances, especially those of kinship.

<sup>71</sup> Utley, *Lance and the Shield*, 285; Robert P. Higheagle, Higheagle manuscript, folder 22, box 104, Walter S. Campbell Collection, University of Oklahoma Library, Norman, 10. The argument that Sitting Bull had doubts receives support from a letter by the missionary Mary Collins in Louis P. Olson, "Mary Clementine Collins," *North Dakota History* 19 (January 1952): 75–8. Gary Clayton Anderson, *Sitting Bull and the Paradox of Lakota Nationhood* (New York, 1996), 159–60, depicts Sitting Bull as a believer.

to know what Sitting Bull really thought, it would certainly have been consistent with Lakota practices for Sitting Bull and others who were interested but unsure of the Ghost Dance to “test” its claims through participation. The notion of testing claims to possess spiritual power was common. For example, when a warrior received power through a dream that made him invulnerable to arrows and bullets, he typically called on members of the community to test his power by shooting at him.<sup>72</sup> Just as claims to invulnerability were confirmed by empirical observation of their efficacy, the Ghost Dance could be validated by having visions while dancing, hearing accounts of others’ visions, or observing that visionaries returned with signs of the new world such as a piece of buffalo meat.<sup>73</sup>

Although in most cases it is possible only to speculate about what any individual thought about the Ghost Dance, Black Elk’s account of his participation in the movement, the most detailed of any narrative, offers a rare look into one man’s experience. When Black Elk first observed a Ghost Dance, he was struck by the congruence between his vision and the scene before him. Employing what might be termed a kind of mystical empiricism, Black Elk observed that the “sacred pole” in the center was “an exact duplicate of my tree that never blooms.” In addition, the way the dancers’ faces were painted red, the pipe, and the eagle feathers were “all from my vision.” At first Black Elk felt sad, but then “happiness overcame me all at once” as he realized that “I was to be intercessor for my people and yet I was not doing my duty. Perhaps it was this Messiah that had pointed me out and he might have set this to remind me to get to work again to bring my people back into the hoop and the old religion.”<sup>74</sup> Black Elk then decided to participate in the Ghost Dance and over the next weeks had several powerful visions.

Black Elk’s experience might be regarded as a religious conversion through which he became certain of the Ghost Dance’s “truth.” A close reading of his account, however, shows that Black Elk remained uncertain about the Ghost Dance even as a participant.

An element of provisionality is suggested in the phrase quoted above—“Perhaps it was this Messiah.” It is also indicated in Black Elk’s account of the Wounded Knee massacre of 29 December 1890. Although Black Elk was not present when the massacre began, he was living close enough to Wounded Knee to hear the firing of the Seventh Cavalry’s guns as they slaughtered his people. Black Elk immediately saddled up, put on his bullet-proof ghost shirt, and rode toward Wounded Knee to “fight for my people’s rights.” Along the way, however, “I just thought it over and I thought I should not fight. I doubted about this Messiah business and therefore it seemed that I should not fight for it, but anyway I was going because I had already decided to. If [I] turned back the people would think it funny, so I just decided to go anyway.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Wissler, “Societies and Ceremonial Associations,” 48–9; Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, 798.

<sup>74</sup> DeMallie, ed., *Sixth Grandfather*, 257–8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

Black Elk's account reveals that even for those who participated in the Ghost Dance, there could be uncertainty and hesitancy. It would be a mistake to think of Black Elk's experience as typical. However, his account suggests that just as Lakota culture did not provide an obvious explanation for the buffalo's decline, neither did it offer a clear answer to the question of whether the buffalo could return. Perhaps relying on the cultural logic outlined by DeMallie, some participants undoubtedly maintained a fervent belief in the coming of a new world. On the other hand, not all Lakotas were sure that the buffalo could return. Some, like Black Elk, participated in the Ghost Dance on a provisional basis. Others participated for a time and then rejected the dance.<sup>76</sup> Still others may have thought that the buffalo could return but doubted that the Ghost Dance itself would be effective. More likely, however, those who did not join the movement were skeptical altogether that decline was reversible, at least for now.

Within a common cultural matrix the western Sioux developed divergent explanations and forecasts on the basis of varying observations, interests, personal inclinations, and group allegiances. All Sioux shared stories about the origins of the Buffalo Nation and their special relationship to the people, but these features of their culture did not dictate a single or narrow range of response to the crisis of the bison's demise. In the face of changing conditions, Indians were capable of "individual calculation, invention, choice, doubt, independence, and experiment."<sup>77</sup> To observe Indians responding in divergent ways to the decimation of the bison is not to say that one response was better than another. It only means that at any given historical moment, especially one of crisis, culture made nothing certain.

Having sketched an outline of Lakota and Nakota perspectives on the bison's decline, let us conclude by revisiting the two quotations with which we began: Curtis's "circular" account of the "old men" of Pine Ridge, who said that the passing of the buffalo was *wakan* and did not believe the herds were gone forever, and Red Cloud's "linear" account that attributed their demise to the American invasion of western Sioux territory. Although I treated these statements as oppositional—one indicating "difference," the other "similarity"—their relationship is more complicated. When the old men of Pine Ridge told Curtis that the buffalo's passing was *wakan*, they were not necessarily excluding the kind of explanation Red Cloud offered. The context for the two statements was different. The Oglalas who talked with Curtis—after all, a guest—would not have wanted to offend him by telling him that his own people were to blame. As a leader speaking before a U. S. commission, however, Red Cloud was in a much different position, one that demanded him to name American responsibility. In another situation, the "old men" might easily have offered an account similar to

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<sup>76</sup> The Hunkpapa Running Antelope participated in the Ghost Dance for a time but eventually rejected it. Mary Collins to "Dear Friends," December 1890, folder 18, box 2, Mary Collins Family Papers, South Dakota Historical Society, Pierre.

<sup>77</sup> William S. Simmons, "Culture Theory in Contemporary Ethnohistory," *Ethnohistory* 35 (Winter 1988): 9.

Red Cloud's. Conversely, Red Cloud would not necessarily have disagreed that the bison's decline was incomprehensible. For the Oglalas part of why the bison's decline was *wakan* may well have been in the very facts that their leader so clearly enunciated before government officials. Was not the terrible history Red Cloud related—the Americans' rejection of Sioux friendship, their invasion of Sioux land, and their destruction of the buffalo—ultimately beyond comprehension?

In sketching the outlines of a Native intellectual history, I have argued for the necessity of balancing recent scholarship's accent on difference with attention to similarity. When Curtis reported that the "old men" of Pine Ridge found the decline of the buffalo "*wakan*, mysterious" and could not be convinced that they had disappeared, he drew upon early century American views that there was a vast chasm between western and Native modes of thought. While modern scholarship has translated the cultural logic that might have underpinned statements like those the Oglalas made to Curtis, an excessive emphasis on radical alterity can reinforce a scheme in which "the west and the rest" are seen to possess hermetic, holistic, incommensurable cultures. Accentuating otherness also risks exoticizing nonwestern thought.

Native Americans and European Americans had very different cosmologies and ways of thinking about history and imagining the future. However, these distinctive cultural contexts, especially when their internal variation and mutability are recognized, allowed for congruence. To demonstrate commensurability is not to celebrate a lost history of intercultural communication. Far from it: my argument is that an overemphasis on difference coincides with a tendency to regard cultural miscommunication as the source of conflict in the encounter between Native Americans and Europeans and thus loses sight of the facts of power. I do not argue that those Indians whose statements were comprehensible in terms of some historical or present form of western discourse were more reasonable than those whose understandings and strategies were less so. My point is only that people sharing similar cultural experiences could articulate multiple viewpoints. In so doing, people may have challenged received cultural wisdom and thereby altered cultural patterns, but divergent positions all had an underlying cultural basis.

Because neither Native American nor European American cultures are monolithic or static, new congruences (as well as oppositions) can always emerge. Operating within an intellectual framework defined by social evolution, early century Americans understood the demise of the buffalo, like the vanishing of the peoples who depended on them, to be an inevitable, albeit tragic, consequence of laws of historical development. There was nothing very mysterious about this. Ironically, however, as historians have recently developed more nuanced accounts of the causes of the bison's demise, the goal of attaining a complete, uncontestable account seems ever more remote.<sup>78</sup> Historians of bison decline do not show overt signs of suffering from the epistemological angst that afflicts much of the modern academy. Nonetheless, the difficulty of adjudicating the proper relative weight of an increasingly complex set of causal factors combined with an awareness of the limitations of the source material

may lead historians of bison decline toward the mistrust of "metanarratives" and skepticism about attaining absolute knowledge of historical "truth" that are commonly acknowledged in many other fields. By suggesting that it may be impossible to develop a definitive account of the bison's decline, recent scholarship shows that what happened was far more mysterious, more *wakan*, than westerners once thought.

In other ways, too, late twentieth-century European Americans may find affinities with the old men of Pine Ridge. As westerners have become disillusioned with narratives of progress, it is more likely for them to think of the bison's near extinction not as an inevitable consequence of historical development but as a tragedy with roots in a mind-set of greed and domination that ultimately defies comprehension. While this view certainly reflects what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia," it also indicates a partial and perhaps useful convergence of non-Native with earlier Native modes of thought.<sup>79</sup>

The recent increase in the free-range bison population and the growing number of tribal bison restoration projects suggest another point of contact.<sup>80</sup> When the old men of Pine Ridge rejected Edward Curtis's contention that the buffalo could not return, few westerners would have taken them seriously. Almost a century later, however, as narratives of progress become less tenable, non-Natives are increasingly likely to think of the future as contingent. It now becomes possible to realize that the old men of Pine Ridge were wise after all and to join them in refusing to be convinced that the buffalo cannot return.

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<sup>78</sup> In addition to the sources cited in n. 29, see David D. Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865–1883," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (Autumn 1994): 313–38; William A. Dobak, "The Army and the Buffalo: A Demur" *Western Historical Quarterly* 26 (Summer 1995): 197–202; David D. Smits, "The Author's Reply," *Western Historical Quarterly* 26 (Summer 1995): 203–8; Andrew C. Isenberg, "Toward a Policy of Destruction: Buffaloes, Law, and the Market, 1803–83," *Great Plains Quarterly* 12 (Fall 1992): 227–41. In a post to the electronic discussion list H-West, 25 June 1996, Elliott West offers a useful summary of the possible causes of the bison's near extinction. See <<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/logs/showlog.cgi?ent=0&file=h-west.log9606d/16&list=h-west>>.

<sup>79</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston, 1989), 68–87.

<sup>80</sup> Ernest Callenbach, *Bring Back the Buffalo!: A Sustainable Future for America's Great Plains* (Washington, DC, 1996), 65–86, offers a useful, if overly romantic, introduction to bison restoration projects. See also David Courmoyer, "Return of the Buffalo: The Efforts to Restore Bison to Native Americans," *Tribal College: Journal of American Higher Education* 7 (Spring 1996): 14–8. The hope for a significant increase in the free-range bison population converges with the controversial suggestion of geographers Deborah Popper and Frank Popper that much of the Great Plains become a "buffalo commons." See Callenbach, *Bring Back the Buffalo!*, 199–219; Anne Matthews, *Where the Buffalo Roam* (New York, 1992). Any future in which a large free-ranging bison population returns to the Plains, of course, faces formidable political obstacles. For a discussion of the significant biological constraints, see Andrew C. Isenberg, "The Returns of the Bison: Nostalgia, Profit, and Preservation," *Environmental History* 2 (April 1997): 190.



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<sup>9</sup> **Killing the Canadian Buffalo, 1821-1881**

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<sup>77</sup> **Culture Theory in Contemporary Ethnohistory**

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<sup>78</sup> **The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883**

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<sup>78</sup> **The Army and the Buffalo: A Demur. A Response to David D. Smits's "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883"**

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