Buffalo in Makhóšica / Badlands National Park, colonially South Dakota, August 2019. Photograph by Mandy Bunten-Walberg.

Storying Futures of the Always-Already Extinct

Challenging Human Exceptionalism; Exploring Animal Survivance

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> *Native storiers of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world, by the turn of seasons, by sudden storms, by migration of cranes, by the ventures of tender lady's slippers, by chance of moths overnight, by unruly mosquitoes, and by the favor of spirits in the water, rimy sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver, and faces in the stone.* (Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance" 11)

Between monstrous cityscapes like those in *Blade Runner* and desolate wastelands in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, at a cursory glance mainstream popular culture imaginings of the future are largely bereft of all but the most inhospitable aspects of the natural world.[1] The stories that people tell about the future are often stories of human-only worlds. The destruction of the natural world might be intended to be part of the cautionary tales underlying these visions of the future—these depictions tell people that we need to act now to protect the planet if we are to avoid such dystopian futures. However, in presenting that it is up to humans to save the Earth from extinction, these stories posit that humans are exceptional to all other species in our capacity to impact the future. Any capacity that other species might have to preserve their own futures is ignored and precluded. These stories say that, without human intervention, other animals are inevitably—and therefore, always-already—extinct.[2]

Hollywood storytelling aside, the discourse that animals are inevitably going extinct—unless they are saved by humans—prevalently and problematically carries over to critical environmental studies. In this paper, I discuss the discursive violence of denying animal futures; highlight the subtle pervasiveness of human exceptionalism that denies animal futures within critical environmental studies; contend that this human exceptionalism undermines critical environmental projects for ethics and justice; and propose and explore how extending Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance to animals may lift understandings of animals out of human exceptionalist trappings regarding agency and futurity.

This paper is a response to pervasive human exceptionalism in critical environmental studies, and therefore, I open it with an overview of human exceptionalism. Readers who are already knowledgeable of human exceptionalism will likely find nothing novel in this section, but I feel it is an important section to include for readers who have not studied human exceptionalism, and as a reminder for those who have.

Following this overview of human exceptionalism, I turn to examining the discursive violence of denying animal futures. There continues to be widespread discourse that Indigenous peoples are on the verge of extinction. Indigenous scholars have described how such foreclosure of Indigenous futures enacts discursive violence against Indigenous peoples, which, in turn, supports physical and material violence being committed against them. I look to this literature, on the violence of denying Indigenous futures, to reveal the violence of denying animal futures.[3]

I end this section by examining how animal futures are denied in David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* and Mick Smith's "Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction." Both of these texts offer significant theoretical contributions to critical environmental studies, including providing theoretical challenges to human exceptionalism; however, they both center humans' roles in impacting the future while omitting other species' agency to impact the future. Therefore, these texts are useful examples of the insidiousness of human exceptionalism in critical environmental scholarship.

In the final section of this paper, I explore how extending Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance to animals may uphold animal agency and futurity. Vizenor uses the term 'survivance' to speak of Indigenous peoples' continuous agential survival against settler colonialism. Extending survivance to animals requires expanding survivance beyond Vizenor's tendency to focus on Indigenous literature: understanding that survivance is not a practice exclusive to Indigenous peoples, and that survivance can be practiced through embodied presence. While camping in Makȟóšiča[4] / Badlands National Park[5] in August of 2016, I was surprised, due to my own ignorance, to find buffalo[6] still living there. The story I knew was that the buffalo had gone extinct. Reading Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi* at the time inspired me to think of the continuing survival of the buffalo as agential survivance undertaken by the buffalo—the buffalo are not merely passively continuing to exist, or preserved only through human actions. I assert that extending the concept of survivance to animals can inspire understandings of animals that challenge human exceptionalism, uphold animal agency, and envision transformative futures where all animals—human and otherwise—might survive with ethics and justice.

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The Context of Human Exceptionalism

Believing that *only* humans are able to combat extinction is an example of human exceptionalism: the discourse that humans are somehow exceptional to all other species—not merely different, but uniquely different. Human exceptionalism is prominent in dominant Western understandings, and remains all too prominent in Western critical environmental studies. However, ideas of human exceptionalism do not hold up well to interrogation. Here, I review some of the literature on human exceptionalism—beginning with work by Giorgio Agamben, and moving through insights from Matthew Calarco, Cynthia Willett, and several scholars' works on animal agency—to ensure that readers have some familiarity with human exceptionalism, in order to better understand certain developments in this paper, and in a broader pursuit of challenging human exceptionalism.

At the base of human exceptionalism is an understanding that humans are uniquely different from all other species; however, Giorgio Agamben examines how the very idea of 'the human' arises more through philosophical posturing than empirically-found differences between humans and other species. Agamben coins the term 'anthropological machine' to highlight how, throughout Western philosophy, humans have been continuously *made distinct* from other animals: "[t]he separation of human life from animal life . . . cannot just be read off of the natural world, as if human beings arrive into the world already neatly distributed into various categories and attributes . . . It is the machine itself that creates, reproduces, and maintains the distinction between human life and animal life" (Calarco 53–54).

Agamben relays how Carl Linnaeus, "the founder of modern scientific taxonomy" (23), "hardly knows a single distinguishing mark which separates man from the apes, save for the fact that the latter have an empty space between their canines and their other teeth" (Linnaeus qtd. in Agamben 24). In his taxonomies, Linnaeus finds himself unable to show "a generic difference between ape and man which is consistent with the principles of natural history" (Agamben 26).[7] Beyond physical traits, language has been proposed as the distinguishing characteristic of humans; "but [language] is not a natural given already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is rather, a historical production . . . If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes" (Agamben 36). Moreover, "[u]p until the eighteenth century, language . . . jumps across orders and classes, for it is suspected that even birds can talk" (Agamben 24). Tool-use was also presented as a possible distinguishing characteristic of humans; however, animals including primates, birds,

and cephalopods have since been found to use tools.

Considering evolutionary theory, it is unreasonable to allege that capacities arose in humans alone that now make us somehow *exceptionally* different to all other species. As Matthew Calarco writes, "[o]ne of Darwin's chief insights is that differences between humans and animals are best explained as differences of degree rather than of kind. There are no huge leaps, abysses, or breaks between species; rather, humans, animals, and all life-forms are participating in the same story of life's evolution" (12). If humans are exceptional to other species, such exceptionalism would have to have arisen through some process other than evolution. However, Cynthia Willett asserts that even "[t]he usual lineup of metaphysical suspects for shoring up human superiority—impartial reason, moral or spiritual freedom, and self-awareness—have been used to gravely overstate our human capacities while obscuring genuinely mind-bending powers that cross species barriers" (101). Willett references work by Barbara Smuts and Frans de Waal to showcase that humans are not the only species to have religious and ethical experiences. Smuts witnesses baboons stopping to sit by waters, and describes how "[t]he still waters seem to unlock for these primates a sacred experience of unity with nature not unlike what might be found in the meditative practices of Buddhists and other spiritual communities" (Willett 102). And, Frans de Waal reports how Kuni, a bonobo living in the Twycross Zoo in England, sought to help a bird who had been injured and fallen into Kuni's enclosure, to fly out of the enclosure—a show of interspecies compassion that also reveals Kuni understanding that the bird has different abilities and ethical needs than herself. In these examples, capacities that might be used to claim a sociopolitical or spiritual human exceptionalism—rather than an evolutionary human exceptionalism—are also shown to not be uniquely human. Overall, regarding the anthropological machine, Calarco summarizes: "[t]he issue here is not simply that all of the traditional ways of cleanly distinguishing human beings from animals have been compromised—this is obviously very much the case. Rather . . . the distinctions have been undermined so radically that the very prospect of trying to re-establish them along other lines no longer seems plausible" (51).

Within the discourse that only humans can combat extinction, agency is commonly posited as a uniquely human trait.[8] Other species of animals continue to be dominantly understood as acting merely through instinct: mechanistically *reacting* to ways that they are acted upon and conditions they find themselves in—though Brian Massumi rigorously examines how creativity is a necessary aspect of instinct, revealing flaws even in this idea that instinct is mechanistic reaction. Numerous accounts showcase animals acting with purpose to alter the conditions of their lives. Frans de Waal's study of chimpanzees in the Arnhem Zoo reveals conspiratorial political societies operating via alliances and deception. John Vaillant relays the story of a tiger who turned to hunting humans, likely after being the unsuccessful target of poachers. This was a breakdown of human-tiger relations in the taiga region of Russia, where the agency and authority of tigers is usually so well understood and respected that "the possibility of a person getting attacked—much less eaten—by a tiger was, literally, laughable—like getting hit by a meteorite" (Vaillant 124). In *Fear of the Animal Planet*, Jason Hribal provides narrative accounts of cetaceans, elephants, pinnipeds, primates, and tigers escaping from captivity and/or rampaging through zoos and circuses. As Jeffrey St. Clair expounds in his introduction to the book,

> Hribal's heroic profiles in animal courage show how most of these violent acts of resistance were motivated by their abusive treatment and the miserable conditions of their confinement. These animals are far from mindless. Their actions reveal memory not mere conditioning, contemplation not instinct, and, most compellingly, discrimination not blind rage. Again and again, the animals are shown to target only their abusers, often taking pains to avoid trampling bystanders. Animals, in other words, acting with a moral conscience. (16)

But despite the logical and empirical flaws of human exceptionalism, it remains a dominant discourse and understanding in Western society. Moreover, challenging human exceptionalism is not merely philosophical 'correction'—bringing discourse into alignment with an empirical ontology where humans are not exceptional to other species. Human exceptionalism has ethical implications. Positioning humans as exceptional to other species provides a basis for denying ethical consideration to other species, suggesting that part of how humans are exceptional is *that we deserve ethical consideration*.[9] Therein, human exceptionalism enables violence to be committed against animals, including via understandings that animals are unable to act for their own futures—that only humans are able to combat extinction.

Damage-Centered Discourse: Violence in Denials of Futurity

As mentioned, dominant discourse continues to position Indigenous peo-

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ples as being on the verge of extinction. Scholarship on how this discourse enacts violence against Indigenous peoples reveals how the discourse that animals are unable to act for their own futures is similarly violent.

Glen Sean Coulthard writes,

> A settler-colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of *domination*; that is, it is a relationship where power—in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power—has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority. (6–7; Coulthard's italics)

Lorenzo Veracini provides an entire alphabet of "transfer," which outlines different forms of those discursive and nondiscursive facets of dispossessing power, including:

> Narrative transfer (II): when a "tide of history" rationale is invoked to deny legitimacy to ongoing indigenous presences and grievances. This transfer focuses on "fatal impacts," on indigenous discontinuity with the past, and typically expresses regret for the *inevitable* "vanishing" of indigenous people. If they have *had* their last stand, if their defeat is irretrievably located in the past, their activism in the present is perceived as illegitimate. An emphasis on an unbridgeable discontinuity between indigenous past and postcolonial present, between an indigenous golden age and contemporary decadence, can then be used to dismiss an indigenous insurgency that must no longer subsist. Indigenous survival is thus transferred away, foreclosed. (41–42; Veracini's italics)

To perpetuate settler colonial *dispossession*, Indigenous peoples are sometimes seen/said to be people who were colonized in the past and are now always-already extinct. As Thomas King writes, "North America has decided that Live Indians living today cannot be genuine Indians . . . Live Indians are fallen Indians, modern, contemporary copies, not authentic Indians at all, Indians by biological association only" (64–65). "Dead Indians are dignified, noble, silent, suitably garbed. And dead. Live Indians are invisible, unruly, disappointing. And breathing. One is a romantic reminder of a heroic but fictional past. The other is simply an unpleasant contemporary surprise" (King 66). Rights and claims of currently living Indigenous peoples are, at times, denied on the basis that these peoples are not 'truly Indigenous,' allowing for the maintained "*dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority" (Coulthard 7; Coulthard's italics). Here, the discourse that Indigenous peoples are unable to ensure their own survival is used to enact continued colonial violence upon Indigenous peoples.

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The discourse that Indigenous peoples are unable to ensure their own survival might be described as 'damage-centered.' Eve Tuck uses the term "damage-centered" to describe how research conducted in Indigenous communities often tends to focus on the historic and contemporary problems that these communities face, often with the hopes of improving the lives of Indigenous peoples, but ignoring positive aspects of Indigenous lives—such as the strength and resilience made evident by Indigenous peoples' continual survival against settler colonialism—and thereby presenting Indigenous peoples as overall being damaged. "This kind of research operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless" (Tuck 409; original italicized). Even if the research carries ethical intentions, the discourse that it uses perpetuates a harmful understanding of Indigenous peoples.

Critical environmental studies can tell similarly damage-centered stories, such as by denying that animals might possess agency, including agency to act against their own extinction. David Abram's book *The Spell of the Sensuous* is a noteworthy text for understanding human interrelationality with the natural world, arguing that "we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (ix). Abram provides phenomenological accounts of how diverse aspects of human experience including language, emotions, spirituality, and thought are tied to human interrelationships with diverse parts of nature. In doing so, he recognizes that nonhuman animals, and other nonhuman beings and entities, have diverse powers and abilities. However, when Abram turns to responding to current ecological crises, he proposes a damage-centered approach where he omits discussing whether or how other beings might be able to preserve their own futures. Abram calls for (Western) humans to remember and revitalize our relations with the natural world, contending that current ecological crises are the result of (Western) human's forgetting our interrelatedness.[10] This remembering and revitalization is a human-centered project.

> We have forgotten the poise that comes from living in storied relation and reciprocity with the myriad things, the myriad *beings*, that perceptually surround us.
>
> Only if we can renew that reciprocity . . . only then will the abstract intellect find its real value. . . . If we

> do not soon remember ourselves to our sensuous surroundings, if we do not reclaim our solidarity with the other sensibilities that inhabit and constitute those surroundings, then the cost of our human commonality might be our common extinction. (Abram 270–271; Abram's italics)

Abram suggests that humans alone can and must save the world—that, in terms of impacting the future, the natural world is "*depleted, ruined and hopeless*" (Tuck 409; Tuck's italics). Abram goes as far as dedicating *The Spell of the Sensuous* "to the endangered and vanishing ones" (v). By providing no description of who these endangered and vanishing ones are, this dedication insinuates that the whole of nonhuman nature is endangered and/or vanishing, and that being endangered and/or vanishing are—now—fundamental characteristics of nature.

In a 2013 paper, "Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction," Mick Smith explicitly addresses extinction in order to challenge human exceptionalism. Smith examines different types of loss that are experienced when a species goes extinct, including loss "of the innumerable ways in which beings become materially manifest in the world such that others sense their presence" (22), loss "of their unique contributions to and effects upon others" (22), loss of "(bio)semiotic potential, where biosemiosis is understood as the production and communication of 'significance' in a very broad sense" (22) and other losses. For Smith, human exceptionalism "regards human communities as distinguished by an ethics and/or politics in which no beings other than humans can possibly participate" (Smith 24). And considering these different forms of loss, and how they are similar to the losses experienced when a loved one dies, Smith concludes that humans are not truly part of exceptional human-only communities, but wider ecological communities: "as we think about these relations and the roles they occupied we realise that there is actually no way of ever summing up the constitutive roles they played in sustaining and/or transforming the community of which they formed a part" (Smith 23). Similar to Abram's text, Smith's text is noteworthy for challenging human exceptionalism; however, also similar to Abram, Smith seems to subsequently take up his challenge to human exceptionalism in a way that perpetuates human exceptionalism. Smith states that "[p]erhaps, one might even say, the realisation of ecological community only begins to make sense through the senseless event of extinction . . . The ecologist (in a more than scientific sense) is someone who is touched by this loss in such a way as to mourn the toll of extinction instituted by human exemptionalism and exceptionalism" (29). I can empathize with this claim; however, it proposes that animals need to be going extinct for humans to connect with them, carrying that other species are necessarily going extinct and that humans—alone—can prevent extinction, once we understand ourselves to be in ecological community.

As noted, both of these texts do offer significant theoretical contributions for challenging human exceptionalism, but I am wary about how both Abram and Smith present other species as essentially going extinct, and present *only* humanity as having the agency to preserve a future against extinction. Even if only by omission, these texts uphold a discourse that other species have no capacity to ensure their own survival. Similar to Indigenous peoples, in denying animals a future they are presented as damaged—"depleted, ruined, and hopeless" (Tuck 409; original italicized); "vanishing and endangered" (Abram v); always-already extinct. And this damage-centered discourse allows for the ethical needs of animals to be ignored. What is the point of providing ethical consideration to something that is—inevitably going—extinct? Therefore, although Abram and Smith are working to develop more ethical and just relations with animals, and other parts of the natural world, the human exceptionalism of suggesting that only humans can challenge extinction enacts discursive violence against animals, limiting Abram's and Smith's projects.

Opening Frameworks for Animal Futurity: Exploring Animal Survivance

To challenge damage-centered research in Indigenous communities, Tuck writes that "[w]e [Indigenous peoples] can insist that research in our communities . . . does not fetishize damage but, rather, *celebrates our survivance*" (422; Tuck's italics). Survivance is a concept particularly promoted by the Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor. As introduced, I began considering survivance as an intriguing framework for upholding the agency and futurity of animals after I found myself unexpectedly camping beside still-living buffalo, in Makȟóšiča.

Reflecting the dynamic nature of survivance, I have not found that Vizenor ever defines survivance straightforwardly. "'Survivance' . . . is not merely a variation of 'survival,' the act, reaction, or custom of a survivalist. By 'survivance' he means a vision and vital condition to endure, to outwit evil and dominance, and to deny victimry"[11] (Vizenor, *Hiroshima Bugi* 36).

> The theories of survivance are elusive, obscure, and imprecise by defi-

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> nition, translation, comparison, and catchword histories, but survivance is invariably true and just in native practice and company. The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry. (Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance" 1)

As I conceptualize it, survivance speaks of active survival. Indigenous peoples have not merely continued to passively survive against violences of colonialism; Indigenous peoples continuously undertake to act in ways that ensure their survival, at times even playing into the disappearance of Indigenous presence under settler colonial imposition in order to continue their stories, storying, and sovereignty. "Native American Indians have resisted empires, negotiated treaties, and as strategies of survivance, participated by stealth and cultural irony in the simulations of absence in order to secure the chance of a decisive presence in national literature, history, and canonry" (Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance" 17). Survivance showcases agency.

As I saw the buffalo of Makȟóšiča, agency was evident in their survival. These buffalo are continuing to survive *despite* their reduced numbers; *against* the imposition of fences, roads, campgrounds, vehicles, etc.; and *without* access to the full extent of their historic territories or the strength of their historic communities. And still they survive—still they maintain their communities, and produce and raise future generations. And their numbers are increasing, with the Wildlife Conservation Society reporting that there are now 500,000 living buffalo, following a historic low of fewer than 1,000 in the late 1800s—although most of the surviving buffalo live on private ranches, to be killed for humans to eat.

Although Vizenor, and many people who write after him, focus on Indigenous peoples' survivance, survivance should not be thought of as something that only Indigenous peoples can undertake.

> [I]f there is no reason to hold survivance to cultural barriers, then . . . I see no reason to hold survivance to species barriers either.

> Survivance stories may begin within an indigenous narrative tradition, but they do not stop at cultural barriers proclaimed by the guardians of narrative authenticity. . . . Hallmarks of this narrative ethos of resistance include an embrace of syncretic openness and ironic welcome to all compatriot storytellers, whatever their culture, who face the imminence of human death with self-knowledge and even a smile. (Lockard 211)

Vizenor utterly rejects the homogenization of diverse Indigenous cultures and nations into the figure of the 'Indian,' recognizing this homogenization to be a colonial act that attempts to disappear Indigenous presences and histories: "The *indian* has no native ancestors; the original crease of that simulation is Columbian . . . . The *indian* is a simulation, the absence of natives; the *indian* transposes the real, and the simulation of the real has no referent, memories, or native stories" (*Fugitive Poses* 15; Vizenor's italics). Consequently, survivance does not arise through some essential Indigenous trait or tradition, and understanding that it does deadens survivance's creativity and active agency:

> The idea of tradition is used in this case as a romantic vision of precontact Native peoples. Vizenor implores that we "set aside the word *tradition*, as in '*indian* traditions,' because it suggests that trickster stories, irony, and the originary deception of language, is a cultural and determined practice. . . . Tradition, as you know, is a tamer, not a liberator." (Vizenor and Lee 60 qtd. in Gamber 231; Gamber's italics)

Promoting understandings that animals are undertaking acts of survivance to continue to survive amid (anthropogenic) ecological crises would overcome the damage-centered human exceptionalism of suggesting that only humans have the agency to challenge extinction. And, if there is no reason to hold survivance to cultural barriers, then—with an eye to the aforementioned challenges to human exceptionalism—I see no reason to hold survivance to species barriers either. At the time of writing, I have not found that Vizenor explicitly discusses animals as being able to undertake acts of survivance, though he alludes to it, including through kabuki-performing dogs and Ainu bears in *Hiroshima Bugi*. And, in *Fugitive Poses*, Vizenor writes: "the bear is the mighty healer of human separation in a narrative. That monotheistic severance of men over women, humans over animals, civilization over savagism, is never closure; bears endure in nature, and in the stories of humans, *as bears must as authors*" (136; my italics).

Vizenor does explicitly discuss the role of animals in Indigenous peoples' stories of survivance: where Indigenous cultures recognize human interrelatedness with animals—rejecting human exceptionalism—animal figures in Indigenous stories can showcase Indigenous presence. "Native stories must create a natural union of authored animals on a tricky landscape of human and animal survivance—the survivance of humans in the literature of animals" (Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses* 135–136).

Much of Vizenor's work focuses on how Indigenous survivance is made present in Indigenous literature and storytelling. This may appear to create a hurdle for expanding survivance to animals, as it is difficult for humans to access the literature and stories of other animals. However, where survivance is "a sense of . . . presence" (Vizenor, "Aes-

thetics of Survivance" 1), it does not need to manifest through storytelling. After all, "[s]urvivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory" (Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance" 11). Presence can be embodied—lived: such is the case with the buffalo, and other animals.

Vizenor repeatedly discusses the Yahi man Ishi as showcasing Indigenous survivance, and Ishi does so in an embodied way. Ishi—whose name was given to him by the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, because he refused to ever share his real name or even nicknames—was a Yahi man who, between 1911 and his death in 1916, "lived and worked for five years in the museum of anthropology at the University of California" (Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance" 4). Theodora Kroeber recounts how after Ishi was "found naked, emaciated, and lost outside Oroville, a mining town on the Feather River in northern California . . . the sheriff had put [Ishi] in jail not knowing what else to do with him since no one around town could understand his speech or he theirs" (81). "Within a few days the Department of Indian Affairs authorized the sheriff to release the wild man to the custody of [Alfred] Kroeber and the museum staff" (Kroeber 81). Ishi enacted survivance through his refusal to give up his cultural understandings and practices even as he accepted his new life in the museum: "Ishi never lost the sense of his own identity. He always knew who he was: a well-born Yana to whom belonged a land and Gods and a Way of Life" (Kroeber 82).

> The Bureau of Indian Affairs sent a special agent to advise Ishi that he could return to the mountains or live on a government reservation. Kroeber writes that Ishi "shook his head" and said through the interpreter that he would "live like the white people from now on. I want to stay where I am. I will grow old here, and die in this house." And by that he meant the museum. Ishi was clearly a native of survivance. (Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance" 4–5)

Storytelling was an aspect of Ishi's survivance, but not the only aspect. The way that he told stories seems as important to his survivance, or even more important, than the stories themselves:

> Ishi was at "ease with his friends," wrote Theodora Kroeber. He "loved to joke, to be teased amiably and to tease in return. And he loved to talk. In telling a story, if it were long or involved or of considerable affect, he would perspire with the effort, his voice rising toward a falsetto of excitement." His stories must have come from visual memories, and he should be honored for more than his stories, his humor, and survivance: he should be honored because he never learned how to slow his stories down to be written and recorded. (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* 135–136)

Ishi's survivance was lived: lived Yahi presence in a museum, against the backdrop of violent settler colonialism. So too, even if animals cannot readily share their written or oral stories of survivance with us, they can make their survivance known through lived presence.

It was the—unexpected—presence of buffalo that caused me to think of their continued survival as an example of survivance. And seeing the buffalo's continued survival as an enactment of survivance is, to me, a more ethical and just way of understanding them. Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston propose that, when considering the natural world, there needs to be a flip in how ethics are conceived. A typical Western philosophical approach to ethics entails determining some ground that makes a being deserving of ethical consideration—such as the possession of reason—and incrementally expanding the purview of where ethical relationships ought to exist by discovering that additional beings possess this ethically-defining criterion. Cheney and Weston describe this conception of ethics as "epistemology-based ethics": you need to know what something is in order to determine whether it is deserving of ethics.

Considering the diversity of the natural world, and the cacophonous[12] mass of violent unethical relations and understandings that exist in the modern world, such an incremental approach does not seem like an effective or apt pathway for building ethical and just relationships. Looking to Indigenous understandings of ethics for inspiration, Cheney and Weston propose that instead of knowing 'things' in order to de-

Buffalo in the Pahá Sápa / Black Hills, colonially Custer State Park, South Dakota, August 2019. Photograph by Mandy Bunten-Walberg.

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termine whether they are deserving of ethics, we need to start from ethics, and come to know the world *through ethics*. Instead of epistemology-based ethics, we need ethics-based epistemology:

> On the usual view, for example, we must first know what animals are capable of, then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On the alternative view, we will have no idea of what other animals are actually capable—we will not readily understand them—until we *already* have approached them ethically—that is, until we have offered them the space and time, the occasion, and the acknowledgment necessary to enter into relationship. Ethics must come *first*. (Cheney and Weston 118; Cheney and Weston's italics)

Within such a framework, even my prior efforts to showcase animal agency in order to challenge human exceptionalism follow the wrong trajectory. Instead of trying to determine *how* animals might be deserving of ethical consideration, I ought to be giving them the time and space to show me how to be in ethical relationship with them. Understanding animals through a lens of survivance contributes to this change in ethics. There are not firm rules on what ought to be considered acts of survivance. Extending survivance to animals calls on people to be open and responsive to diverse animal agencies, presences, and futurities.[13]

My intention is not to disregard the reality of anthropogenic extinctions, or to excuse political inaction on anthropogenic climate change with claims that 'animals will preserve their own futures.' There is an historical and political reality to anthropogenic extinction, which humans have an ethical responsibility to attend to. However, the discursive violence of claiming that *only* humans can prevent extinction, or otherwise impact the future, must be acknowledged and addressed.

Close to Makȟóšiča, informative displays at sites such as Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park tell stories of the continued survival of buffalo; however, these displays give little credit to the buffalo's own efforts to survive and instead focus on human endeavours to protect buffalo. Telling the story of the buffalo through the lens of survivance would maintain that these buffalo can continue to survive without relying on human intervention, and would reject that these buffalo remain on the verge of inevitable extinction. Survivance upholds animal futures. Moreover, animal survivance also upholds the possibility of transformative futures for humans. The slaughter of buffalo, which led to my belief that they were extinct, was a colonial act: colonial agents understood that some Indigenous nations' ways of living and being were deeply interrelated with buffalo, and so, they believed, if the buffalo were killed off then it would be easier to dispossess these Indigenous nations of their lands and ways of life. Describing the slaughter of buffalo as part of his *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* art exhibition, Kent Monkman writes:

> [S]lowly we realized that it wasn't only for sport, the soldiers knew we couldn't live without the buffalo, and they were right. Once so numerous, it took several days for a herd to pass, they were now almost entirely gone and our people were starving. It was one more way they tried to make us disappear, but the buffalo came back, and we never left. (15)

While the continued survival of animals is significant in and of itself, and is important for achieving ethics and justice for these animals, the continued survival of animals also provides for ways of living and being where humans are interrelated with other animals, and other aspects of nature. Other species need to survive if humans are to have futures beyond or outside of our current ecological crises and human exceptionalist understandings. Telling stories that they can survive, that they are not inevitably going extinct, seems like an important step on the path to making those futures realities. As Richard Simonelli writes:

> The return of *tatanka* to Native lands is an act of generosity on the part of the buffalo themselves. . . . The respect we offer the buffalo may foretell how sincere and lasting our relationships can be with one another. (23)

Notes

[1] In this paper, I use "natural world" in a similar sense to Abram's "more-than-human world," to refer to the interrelational world of humans, other animals, plants, fungi, rocks, dirt, waters, airs, et cetera (see Harris 41–42, this volume). While Abram's term works to situate humans as interrelated with these other beings and elements, it also continues to center humans. Therefore, I do not use "more-than-human world" in this paper, when my focus is on challenging human exceptionalism in critical environmental studies.

[2] As I will mention later, this paper should not be taken to disregard the reality of anthropogenic extinctions, or excuse political inaction on anthropogenic climate change with claims that 'animals will preserve their own futures.' There is an historical and political reality to anthropogenic extinction, which humans have an ethical responsibility to attend to. Nevertheless, this ethical responsibility does not mean that humans are exceptionally able to prevent extinction or otherwise impact the future.

[3] Billy-Ray Belcourt calls for a decolonial animal studies that "engage[s] with a politics of animality that . . . is accountable to animal subjectivities and futurities outside settler colonialism *and* within a project of decolonization" (8; Belcourt's italics). In an effort to contribute to this project, I look to Indigenous and decolonial scholarship to inform my critique of denying animal futures and to explore an understanding of animal agency and futurity, via Vizenor's concept of survivance.

[4] Lakota place names are taken from Engel.

[5] Oglala Lakota territory. Colonially South

Dakota. Part of the park is on Wazí Aháŋhaŋ Oyáŋke (Pine Ridge Reservation), though not where I was camping.

[6] American buffalo (*Bison bison*) are considered bison, not true buffalo, within dominant scientific taxonomy. However, many Indigenous writers refer to *Bison bison* as "buffalo," so I use the term "buffalo" in this paper, following their lead.

[7] Although Agamben turns to Linnaeus for an authority on biological classification—and I do as well, when quoting Agamben—I must note that Linnaeus contributed to pseudoscientific justifications for racism. Alongside classifying animals and plants, Linnaeus classified humans into five categories: *Homo sapiens Americanus*, *Homo sapiens Asiaticus, Homo sapiens Afer, Homo sapiens Europaeus*, and *Homo sapiens Monstrosus* (see Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* xiv, for Vizenor's take on Linnaeus' racism).

[8] There is little consensus on definitions of "agency" across theories and disciplines, and there is ongoing debate around whether and/or which animals—and other living and nonliving beings—ought to be considered as possessing agency (Timmins). I use the term "agency" to challenge where dominant Western understandings do not understand other animals, in comparison to humans, as being able to act with intention or purpose, and do not understand animals as being able to significantly impact the world around them.

[9] When groups of humans, such as women, 2SLGBTQ+ people, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, et cetera (see Harris 41–42, this volume), are denied ethical consideration, they are also often presented as being somehow less than human (see Agamben, Plumwood).

[10] At times Abram addresses that this forgetting is particularly a problem in Western understandings. At other times he seems to present this forgetting as a problem among all humans.

[11] I do not mean to dismiss people who identify as victims, in various contexts. As I read Vizenor, his problem with "victimry" is how Indigenous peoples are essentialized as *always only* being victims, without choosing or consenting to this identity. Velie writes that Vizenor objects to "portraying Indian history as an unbroken string of atrocities and humiliations, devoid of highpoints or anything that Indians can point to with pride . . . . Vizenor objects to people using Indians as sticks to beat white America and to offering Indians pity and condescension but no respect" (148).

[12] I come to the term "cacophony" from Byrd, who uses it to discuss how U.S. empire has impacted different peoples, in different parts of the world, at different times, in varying ways.

[13] The active agential quality of survivance distinguishes it from similar concepts, such as resilience. Resilience denotes a passive characteristic that some beings possess and others do not, leading to an epistemology-based ethics situation where we need to know which beings are resilient in order to determine how we should consider or care for them. Survivance, on the other hand, must be practiced. Therefore, actions can be viewed through the frame of survivance in order to gain a new understanding of them, reflecting ethics-based epistemology.

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