

## Survival: Colonialism as a Discourse in Beatrice Culleton's

### *Spirit of the White Bison*

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As a student reading aboriginal Canadian women writings, I have had often to face questions which seek to define aboriginal Canadian women's literature. *Define* is to "state or describe exactly the nature, scope, or meaning of" [*OED*]. To do so would perhaps lead to dependence on the vocabulary of colonialism, which according to Maori writer Linda Tuhiwai Smith may be encompassed in three concepts, viz., the line, the centre and the outside. She explains how these three concepts have manipulated the very manner in which the colonial powers that be have "discovered," made conquest of, exploited, distributed and appropriated indigenous cultures.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, after we ask "What is aboriginal Canadian women's literature?" or "When would one mark the earliest period of aboriginal literatures?" other questions await us: "What is aboriginal Canadian?" or "What is period?" or "What is literature?" Definitive answers to these questions would inevitably lead to a "validation" of aboriginal literatures on being "heard" as marginalized voices using established theory and irrelevant aesthetics. This would reiterate the reservations of aboriginal women writers about "too easy identification by the non-Native reader, ignorance of historical or cultural allusion, obliviousness to the presence or properties of Native genres, and the application of irrelevant aesthetic standards" (Hoy 9), which are all means of domesticating the unknown. This premise of misunderstanding and misreading could have been a deterrent to my readings in aboriginal literatures had I not read the opening remarks of Native arts activist Viola Thomson, who moderated both panels at the *Telling It* Conference (1988), and as quoted by Daphne Marlatt in the Introduction to the *Telling It* Conference Collective:

I encourage each of you to continue empowering these women and the work that they're doing, and you can do that in many different ways. You can do that by raising the issue within the learning schools of whether or not their books are part of the schooling. You can do that by seeking out their books and reading them. You can do that by sharing what you learned here today with your beloved ones, because each of us in our way can help each other come to a better understanding by really sharing. (14)

*Spirit of the White Bison* (1985), written by Canadian First Nations author Beatrice Culleton, is the story of a young bison (who is also the narrator) growing up on

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<sup>1</sup> According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "The 'line' is important because it was used to map territory, to survey land, to establish boundaries and to mark the limits of colonial power. The 'centre' is important because orientation to the centre was an orientation to the system of power. The 'outside' is important because it positioned territory and people in an oppositional relation to the colonial centre" (53).

the plains in the late 1800s. North America was once home to countless bison. Indian people held these animals in reverence, for the bison provided food, clothing and shelter. With the coming of the Europeans, a new people, the Métis, came into being. They also made their living from the plains bison. But soon, people came in larger numbers and they had different values – values based in power and control. In this book, a white bison tells about the deliberate decimation of the plains bison by the Europeans. While this text is often seen as a specimen of children’s literature, it also bears a striking analogy to the colonial violence suffered/endured by the indigenous peoples of Canada, particularly by the Métis. I would like to explore how *Spirit of the White Bison* is a symbol for the demise of Native and Métis ways and people. The challenge is to understand Native literature in terms of the author’s cultural background and tradition, and in terms of the history of the First Nations peoples.

Beatrice Culleton in the “Introduction” to the *Spirit of the White Bison* says, “It was not a quiet, accidental extermination. The horror was that the killings were deliberate, planned, military actions” (3).<sup>2</sup> Culleton expresses her concern for the nuclear age and feels the danger of nuclear war. Her idea of writing this book was to have an aboriginal story that could be used in animation. The story tells much more than decimation of the buffalo, rather it draws a connection between the killings of the plains bison and the destruction of the aboriginals. She says, “And finally, I think it is ironic that one has to ‘fight’ for peace” (5).

The narration begins in the first person with reference to the birth of White Bison on a warm spring day. According to her Mama, the White Bison is special as she was born under a rainbow. But her white coat makes her feel alienated and different from the other buffalo. As other buffalo refuse to play with her, the White Bison makes friends with the birds, the prairies, and dogs. The system of education that she inherits from her Mama is the one that is based on understanding and comprehension, rather blind rote from memory. She says, “It was very important to pay strict attention to whatever we were taught. It could be that we wouldn’t have a second try at the lessons” (7-8). The oral-based culture of Native peoples passes cultural capital down through spoken words allowing for a continual contemporariness, an adaptive pedagogy that is always in tune with the here and now. This sense of a cyclic continuum contrasts with the linear nature of the settler society’s perspective.

This also posits culture as a site of conflict from the period of before literature or “orature,” via the colonial period, to the present. One can also formulate and analyze alternate themes, such as celebration, the city, civilization, courage, decisions, death, families, legendary figures, Native pride, Nature, Old ways and new, protest, quest, schools, visions, values, women’s experience, work, etc.

The community life of the buffalo is described in great detail by White Bison. With millions of buffalo, the herd leader is Great Bison, the sire of White Bison. The older buffalos offer protection and care to young buffalos from all natural dangers. But differences which occur between the young ones have to be settled between themselves. The White Bison is perceptive enough to realize that had she sought her mother’s

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<sup>2</sup> Citations for quotes from the novel will be indicated by page numbers only in parentheses.

protection, her counterparts would not have troubled her, but “then, again, perhaps she would have made me go out there and stand up for myself” (8).

The text describes in great detail the sovereignty of the buffalo herds, their sense of justice and communal well-being. The enemies that the White Bison initially talks about are wolves and grizzly bears. The White Bison notes, “We were taught to keep watch no matter what we were doing” (8). The buffalo were beyond protection when the buffalo hunters came on horse backs with their bows and arrows.

A very engrossing and exciting description of the buffalo hunting on the plains is given by White Bison. It was a “scary and exciting” event with equal danger to both the hunter and the hunted. White Bison’s cousin Bison Boy loses his mother in such an encounter. Henceforth, he comes under the protection and tutelage of White Bison and her mother. White Bison also fights Big Ben, the strongest one, in order to protect Bison Boy. As an aftermath of this encounter, Bison Boy injures his leg and Bison Boy and White Bison are separated from the rest of the herd and lose their way in the prairies. Open to danger and the unknown, White Bison begins her first lesson of survival in a desolate condition: “It was strange not to hear the snorting and occasional bellows of bison blowing dust from their noses. There were no sounds of swishing tails chasing flies away; no sounds of the shaking of great shaggy heads; no sounds of bison rolling on the earth to rub themselves or of hooves hitting the ground after scratching; no angry cows or bulls, stamping the ground in challenges. There were none of the sounds I had taken for granted until now. And I missed those sounds already. Without the great herd, the plains seemed totally empty” (14). But the White Bison as the protector of bison boy cannot express her fear of the alien space.

Trapped in the midst of the buffalo hunters, White Bison further describes the art of buffalo hunting and its utilities: “One group was working at removing a hide from a body while others cut the meat from a freshly stripped carcass into long flat pieces and lay them over rocks and hung them from sticks tied horizontally. I could see some of the children collecting wood for the fires the women had made near the bulky forms. We also stumbled upon a group of children who were picking berries” (16). The Plains Indians shared a symbiotic relationship with the buffalo. In *People of the Buffalo*, Maria Campbell explains, “The buffalo provided the plains people with their main source of food. When a herd was sighted, the medicine man of the tribe would call all the people together to dance to the Buffalo Spirit for a successful hunt. After the ceremony the hunting party would set out” (26).

This interconnectedness exists not only among the nation's members but among all creation – human and nonhuman. Campbell in *People of the Buffalo* asserts, “It was not possible for the Indian to separate his life as man does today into different categories such as work, play, religion, and art. To him, every part of life and all forms of life made up “the whole.” To ignore one part was to lessen, even destroy one’s self” (7). The spirit of “All my relations” in indigenous thought system is not just family, but includes animals, plants, rocks, the entire ecosystem; all included in “Mother Earth” and “Father Sky.”

*Spirit of the White Bison* offers a vivid delineation of the way of life of the Plains Indians before the buffalo were decimated. As summer changes to autumn, the cousins are still lost:

There was a tense gray mood in the air, even on the sunny days, and it puzzled me. High in the skies, countless flocks of birds headed southward, leaving a quiet across the land. It was not a calm quiet but one that gave a sense of foreboding. Changes were coming. But what kind? The sense of being lost and alone deepened(17).

Winter brought another great danger. As she tries to protect herself and Bison Boy from a cougar in a mortal combat, White Bison is saved by her first human friend. A white skinned man who has taken the mountains for his home, somewhere no white man has yet visited. The cousins are reunited with their herd after this encounter.

Chapter 3 begins after many seasons have passed by. Bison Boy, Big Ben, and White Bison are young adults who take their turns protecting the young and have also learnt to be comrades. The changes in life are natural ones, except for the one two-legged hunters who used muzzle-loading shots now. White Bison notices that often the force of gunshots threw the riders off-balance from their horses. She also realizes that she is probably the only one in her herd to notice these changes. The prairie fires also are a source of danger. In one such fire, as the buffalo herd panic and flee, they come face-to-face with the fair skinned man who had once saved White Bison's life. White Bison's presence of mind saves the man from being stampeded by the herd. The nature of the hunters also changes. White Bison observes:

Over the next few years, different kinds of weapons were used. And it came to me that I could no longer call the men who used then 'hunters'. Our first encounter with them occurred on the southern ranges. The horsemen who came no longer had to ride among us. They rode on the outskirts, safe from falling under the hooves of the buffalo, and shot at us, indiscriminately. They never stayed long and they never came with their women and children. ... We had been hunted in different ways but never had we seen this kind of outright killing before" ( 27).

"Any kind of expression," says Ipshita Chanda, "that uses words as medium, whether written or oral, is wittingly or unwittingly, a record of the encounter between life histories and the historical moment, and thus any text is a testimony of this encounter." Literature has its own means and methods of rendering these encounters into literary works within a literary system. The hunting was no longer a frenzy of excitement but one which instilled dreadful fear among the herds. Many bison are killed in these hunts. White Bison loses her sire, Great Bison as well. As she stands guard over his body, driving away flies and maggots, she meets the second and perhaps the most important human contact in her life, Lone Wolf, the dark-skinned Indian man. Beast and man silently commute. White Bison senses the former's sadness and awe. Lone Wolf speaks his mind and the first connection between the parallel story of the decimation of buffalo and Indians is revealed. He says, "Grandfather said they would come to kill your kind so that they could conquer our kind. They have begun, haven't they?"

Lone Wolf digs a grave for White Bison's sire, Great Bison, and they fix that site as a meeting place for future. For White Bison, who has always been taught to be wary of man, it is indeed an unique experience. He says, "But long after the meeting, I thought of Lone Wolf and I hope we would meet again, soon" (34).

Lone Wolf belongs to the Sioux tribe of the Plains. According to Campbell in *People of the Buffalo*,

"No other group in North America has been more misunderstood, romanticized and stereotyped than the Plains Indians, probably because of a lack of understanding and concern by the early travelers, missionaries and historians who tried to record the Indian culture and way of life without fully understanding it. They described the Plains Indians either as a childlike people who worshipped spirits or as bloodthirsty savages who liked bangles and beads. Books and films repeat the errors and the misunderstandings" (7).

The complex relationship shared by White Bison and Lone Wolf epitomizes the cultural and geographical ethos of the indigenous peoples. It leads to an understanding of how survival was a struggle predicated upon the realities of racism and colonialism.

More seasons pass. The White Bison and her herd find their grazing area curtailed by railway tracks. Hunters from a train monster trigger off another bout of merciless rampage. The White Bison loses her mother in the conflict and Lone Wolf is too late to bury her. The White Bison realizes that these people were not hunters, but murderers who killed for sport merely. A meeting with Lone Wolf tells us how the treaties have been driving Indians to reservations: "They want us to sign treaties that say we will live on reservations and we will not hunt anymore. How can we live if we cannot hunt? Some of the nations have signed these treaties and now they depend on the white man for their food" (38).

White Bison and her friend Lone Wolf are driven to despair and anger. White Bison ponders, "Would the men with their weapons always, always in the future make changes for the worst? Did they not care about their futures? Would this land of ours one day be covered by men murdering each other?" (38-40) Meetings with Lone Wolf become rarer and finally Lone Wolf brings his niece and nephew to White Bison such that they learn of her spirit. He says, "I brought them here so that they could see the great white buffalo and so that your spirit would pass on down through them to their young ones. I am getting old and my time to die will soon come" (50). This is the last meeting involving a communion of spirit and mortal self between White Bison and Lone Wolf.

As the days pass, the future seems bleaker than usual. Lone Wolf loses his family to starvation and small pox, and the only path left to him is war. For White Bison too, the loss is all pervasive. She loses her mother, her friends, Big Ben, and Bison Boy and all near and dear ones to the merciless killings. Finally, she is the oldest bison in the herd. She also realizes that all cannot see her. Perhaps, the spirit of the White Bison cannot be gauged by all and sundry. Protecting the dead rather than the living, she realizes, "The land was no longer ours. Another kind of animal was taking it over" (53). A final

encounter with soldiers, who are able to see her, costs White Bison her life. Lone Wolf arrives to save her but it is too late. Both friends are killed, albeit after killing the merciless hunters.

The narration at this point changes to a third-person narrative. A fair-skinned man and his Métis friend approach the dead bodies of the soldiers and the friends. The Métis recognizes Lone Wolf as belonging to the Sioux. The Sioux are a warrior tribe, and one of their proverbs says, "Woman shall not walk before man." Yet White Buffalo Woman is the dominant figure of their most important legend. The medicine man Crow Dog explains, "This holy woman brought the sacred buffalo calf pipe to the Sioux. There could be no Indians without it. Before she came, people didn't know how to live. They knew nothing. The Buffalo Woman put her sacred mind into their minds." At the ritual of the sun dance one woman, usually a mature and universally respected member of the tribe is given the honor of representing Buffalo Woman. Though she first appeared to the Sioux in human form, White Buffalo Woman was also a buffalo the Indians' brother, who gave its flesh so that the people might live. Albino buffalo were sacred to all Plains tribes; a white buffalo hide was a sacred talisman, a possession beyond price.

The fair skinned man is none other than the one who had once saved and been saved by White Bison many years ago. At his behest, they did a grave for the two friends. The fair skinned man, looking down upon the White Bison says: "It's been a life time since I saw you. But your spirit has always been with me. You have made me feel special. And you gave me a longer life, too. For both of those things, I thank you. I'm going to bury you. And your friend, here, I hope that will count for something." (Culleton 58).

As the fair skinned man and the Métis ride away, the narrative shifts to the first person once more:

Lone Wolf and I smiled. We watched both men ride off into the distance. And then we began our own journey to the Great Spirit world beyond. My spirit would return again in the future to walk with those who were gentle but strong, I would be seen by few, perhaps in visions, perhaps in dreams" (61).

The communion with land, and nature is a crucial juncture for indigenous peoples. According to Beverly Hungry Wolf, "From my Native ancestors I inherited a special closeness to the land. They treated the Earth like a mother. In our traditional Native view of the world, everything is parallel to nature" (77). In the words of Jeannette Armstrong, "Words are memory / a window in the present / a coming to terms with meaning / history made into now / a surge in reclaiming / the enormity of the past" ("Landscape" 64)

Many Native writers such as Lee Maracle along with Armstrong see "reclaiming ourselves" as a central project of aboriginal peoples in the 21st century. Maracle's works "document a determination to write 'home'" rather than to "write back," as postcolonial critics describe the literature of colonized peoples. She says, "I don't write in or to a culture not my own. If I forget that for a minute, if I stray from that for a second, my writing would be useless to all, including you. 'Tis Canadians, most of all white Canadians, that need to walk a mile in my moccasins" ("Just Get" 41).

Beatrice Culleton also directs her writings to the general reader rather than the academia. She expresses surprise at the fact that her novels are taught at the university (“This Was” 47), and that when she had begun to write, she had just wanted to address the question of alcoholism in *her* community (Lutz 104). Helen Hoy argues as she discusses Culleton’s novel, *In Search Of April Raintree*, “If novelty, authorial self-expression, and originality of execution give way in Culleton’s aesthetic credo to instrumental and communal values, then her writing may require different methods of evaluation that recognize these also as artistic achievements” (102). Hoy is obviously referring to the methodology of the social sciences predicated upon the dictates of the Enlightenment and humanism. For her part, Hoy confesses, “The book is on my syllabi, after all, in part because of my desire to learn more from and about writing that moves and speaks to many, that serves needs that may differ from my own or the academy’s” (100).

This is also a point of deviation for me. The cultural paradigms I function upon are definitely not as alienated as Hoy feels hers to be, perhaps, due to a common history of oppression shared by Indians and aboriginal Canadians. Hoy also describes her experiences while teaching Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash*:

Only one student in the three classes where I first taught the novel was a *passionate* defender of the book itself – as opposed to its right to be heard; the class with the least initial resistance was also the least advanced, an illuminating concrete illustration of that much-theorized issue of the university’s function in enforcing the master’s discourse (34).

In the context of aboriginal Canadian writings, Taine’s classical three-pronged approach to studying forms of art could be reworked and therefore subverted if one asked the following questions: Which race? Which moment? Whose milieu? This would then show how the *history* of a “nation,” the makings of a “natural” environment, and the “influence” of “culture” narrate a painful story of colonization for the founding peoples of the Americas in the post-contact period. Post-contact postcolonialism is in itself a debatable term in the indigenous vocabulary, as is best articulated by Aborigine activist Bobbi Sykes, who asked at an academic conference on postcolonialism, “What? Postcolonialism? Have they left?”

While reading aboriginal literatures, to assume to have taken the “absolutely”<sup>3</sup> right approach to the same would be dangerous, if not foolish. The fact is that literary criticism is itself insulting to the indigenous condition, as no one may assume to know the absolute meaning of any work of art. According to non-aboriginal scholar Renate Eigenbrod, “Literary criticism is not only considered redundant and presumptuous because nobody can understand a text *for* another person, but also disrespectful (as it implies more than just listening)” (16).

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<sup>3</sup> I am inspired here by Japanese Canadian writer Joy Kogawa’s comment, “I don’t think we ever absolutely know whether we’re doing the right thing or not. We just sort of stumble to the right, and we stumble to the left, and we struggle, and that’s what it means to be part of the human condition” (97).

So, once again, positioning myself vis-à-vis aboriginal Canadian women's writings becomes controversial, if one were to travel from theory to practice. Rather, a *rapprochement* may be attempted between the two, by travelling from the texts and the authors to their specific historical locations. Theory would be worked upon *a posteriori*. As Lee Maracle in her essay "Oratory: Coming to Theory" says, "Theory is useless outside human application." Maracle discusses her feminist treatise *I Am Woman* as a book of theory, and the theory is arrived at through stories. Therefore, any journey into aboriginal Canadian writing cannot begin from preconceived theoretical practices, rather the theories may be developed through the words of the writers themselves. Their texts and stories would give an understanding on how one may read them.

Since the 1990s, the establishment of Native-run presses such as Theytus Books (Penticton), Seventh Generation Books (Toronto), Pemmican Publications (Winnipeg); Native theatre companies such as Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto), De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig (Wikwemikong), and the Centre for Indigenous Theatre (Toronto); Native run journals and magazines such as *Akwesasne Notes*, *Gatherings*, *Sweetgrass*, and *Aboriginal Voices*; The Committee to Re-establish the Trickster (Toronto); Canadian Native Arts Foundation (Toronto); and the En'owkin International School of Writing (Penticton) have all reflected the desire of First Nations people in Canada to control the contexts in which they speak with each other. Smaller Native presses such as Moonprint (Winnipeg) and Rez (Kwantlen First Nation, Langley, British Columbia), Native-focused presses such as Fifth House (Saskatoon), and presses run by women of colour, such as Williams-Wallace (Stratford, ON) and Sister Vision (Toronto), have also contributed to this change. The Weesageecchak Begins to Dance Festival, providing workshops for New Native playwrights and choreographers, is a separate undertaking of Native Earth. In the area of literary analysis, publications such as *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, edited by Jeannette Armstrong, *Iskeewak – Kah' Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak*; *Neither Indian Princess Nor Easy Squaws*, by Janice Acoose/Misko-Kîsikàwihkwè, *How Should I Read These should I Read These* by Helen Hoy, *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures* edited by Armand Garnet Ruffo, to name a few, insist on Native perspectives regarding their literature and their representation.

According to Lee Maracle, while reading it is important to realize that in the indigenous context,

Interaction between people, the establishment of relations either organically or consciously, is what culture is all about. Language is one means of expression of culture, but it is not the main expression. ... Interaction around eating, working, living, rights to privacy, respect for space territory – all are cultural. Songs, stories, dance, language all reflect and articulate culture, but language is not the basis for it any more than song or dance ("Ramparts" 168-9).

The EuroCanadian or EuroAmerican system of thought wishes to categorize, label, and name. Naming is a site of authority. The explorers of yesteryears on their discoveries, mapping lands, digging flags, exerting ownership as exhibited on the moon and now in outer space as well have always positioned themselves in the discursive field of



knowledge within imperialism and neo-imperialism. Any portion of reality which is not tangible is deemed as 'fantasy', as 'non-analytical' and hence, deserving of condescending patronage at the most. A story can never be 'real'. The Laguna storyteller Leslie Silko reminds us: "I will tell you something about stories / They aren't just entertainment / Don't be fooled / They are all we have, you see, / All we have to fight off / Illness and death. You don't have anything / If you don't have the stories" (2).

Colonial ideology has been sustained by a continuous negation of indigenous notions of history. This was because more than often, such views were considered "primitive," "incorrect," and also ones which subverted and revolted against the colonial machinery. History is being re-written, or rather re-spoken by Aboriginal women writers across the world. Aboriginal women writers construct their own theory. Their stories provide the theoretical framework of their writing. Renate Eigenbrod cautions that

if non-Aboriginal scholars apply established theories in order to read Aboriginal literatures critically; they do not decentre the dominant discourse but, on the contrary, emphasize its centrality as it often seems to "validate" marginalized voices (89).

Perhaps, therefore, it would not suffice to merely create a "third space" of interaction with Aboriginal writings. It is the Third Space that "though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha 37).

According to Janice Acoose, "Indigenous peoples' writing primarily grows out of a gyrocratic-circular-harmonious way of life while non-Indigenous peoples writing in Canada has primarily grown out of a Christian-patriarchal hierarchy" ("PostHalfbreed" 38). The above-mentioned characteristic arises out of the oral nature of the indigenous traditions. It distinguishes the Western realist tradition from the indigenous method of telling a story.

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