“Let a man decide upon his favorite animal and make a study of it…let him learn to understand its sounds and motions. The animals want to communicate with man, but *Wakan-Tanka* does not intend they shall do so directly – man must do the greater part in securing an understanding.”

– Brave Buffalo of Standing Rock Reservation

Recently, I learned about the Ogalala Sioux tribe’s history and relationship with bison, the largest land mammal in North America. Prior to European colonization in the 17th century, the Great Plains of North America supported a population of about 40 million bison. For the Oglala Sioux people of the North American Plains, bison are incredibly meaningful culturally and spiritually (insert footnote to reference). For the Ogalala, the buffalo are one with the earth and represent all growing and living beings (insert footnote). In myth, the “White Buffalo Cow Woman” (cite) presents the Ogalala with a sacred pipe and seven sacred rites, which provide the Ogalala with wisdom, survival, and power (medicine man book pg. 44). While the bison --otherwise known as *Wakan-Tanka--* represent all beingsthey are also equated specifically with women. I was inspired by the bison’s central role in Ogalala Sioux understandings of the natural world and social relationships. As a poet I wanted to express my thoughts and feelings about the bison in verse. In the poems which follow, I combine my own experience with meeting bison in central Iowa with what I’ve learned about the Ogalala Sioux in the last few weeks. I have learned about the Ogalala Sioux’s relationship with bison from a mix of primary and secondary research, and I’ve included references below. I have only begun to learn about the bison and the Ogalala Sioux, and recognize how much I do not know. My learning and application of it is shaped by my experiences, which are not indigenous.

watching the bison

*do not come too close me*, he says, with strong brown eyes that contain the world.

She stands atop

packed black dirt,

Facing me

as I forget my self, forget my name, feel my breath, feel hers too

Shadows appear from the afternoon sun. reflecting their sacred bodies,

moral behavior power survival are entangled within their woolly fur

the *tatanka*,‘buffalo’, are four-legged people,

who hold a mystery of sacred life,

which travels

in dust

formed playfully wallowing, rubbing their backs

with packs

of Earth’s colorful skin.

In progress:

Three more poems, plus photos I have taken of the bison

Citations