

AMITAV GHOSH

Brutes

*Meditations on the myth
of the voiceless*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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IT IS VERY RARE TODAY for the word *brute* to be used in the way it was in the past. Nobody refers to animals, let alone to people or races, as brutes anymore; nobody even cries out “you brute!” as characters so often do in Victorian novels.

But even as the original coinage fades from everyday usage, its derivatives, like *brutal* and *brutality*, have become ubiquitous—on the internet, in newspapers, and on signs protesters carry through the streets as they chant “Black Lives Matter!”—for police brutality is, of course, at the heart of the protests.

The current ubiquity of the word *brutality* is an indication of a stunning reversal: no longer is this domain of meaning configured around the savage or the semicivilized; it is centered instead on the repressive machinery of the state, primarily the police. The inversion of meaning establishes an etymological arc that links the planetary crisis directly back to processes of colonization, enslavement, and biopolitical war.

With every passing day—I am writing these words in late July 2020—more and more historical connections are being dragged out of the mists of the past to link, for example, contemporary police violence to the slave patrols of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plantations. Every day I see references to the year 1619, when English pirates brought the first slave ship to Virginia.

Every day there is news of statues of slave traders and Confederate generals being toppled.

The outraged commentary in the right-wing media suggests that many are under the impression that toppling statues is new, at least in the metropolitan centers of former colonial empires. But it is not. The Dutch began to take down statues of Jan Pieterszoon Coen decades ago.

I watch in fascination video clips of a protest in Bristol, England, which ends with the statue of a slave trader responsible for the enslavement of more than eighty-four thousand Africans being thrown into the very waters from which his ships had once set sail. In this, as in most such protests, the participants are mostly young and white.

Delusion is itself an essential component of the catastrophe now unfolding across the planet.

I watch the beheading of a statue of Christopher Columbus, and am reminded of the omniscient orgies of the admiral's second voyage to the Caribbean, when his troops "had gone ashore and killed indiscriminately, as though for sport, whatever animals and birds and natives they encountered, 'looting and destroying all they found,' as the Admiral's son Fernando blithely put it." I remember also that this voyage introduced influenza to the Americas, and that Columbus himself had fallen sick with it, on the island of Hispaniola. While he lay ill, his soldiers went on rampages, which, together with the disease, killed more than fifty thousand of the island's people. On recovering, Columbus "massed together several hundred armored troops, cavalry and a score or more of trained attack dogs. They set forth across the countryside, tearing into assembled masses of sick and unarmed native people, slaughtering them by the thousands."

On an impulse I look up the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 in the United States and find that it has crossed 115,000. I discover also that in the weeks since March 8, when I began to self-isolate, more than 570 people have been killed by mass shootings in the U.S., and that gun violence has actually increased during the lockdown.

I am mesmerized by video footage of a demonstration, organized jointly by the Black Lives Matter and "Rhodes Must Fall" movements, calling for the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the premises of an Oxford college. The college authorities had previously dismissed these demands on the grounds that

the statue is "a reminder of the complexity of history and of the legacies of colonialism"—an absurd argument, because the statue itself reduces the complexity of history to the image of a colonizer.

The Oxford demonstration is huge, far larger than expected, as are many of the protests that call for the removal of these statues. This seems to puzzle some commentators, even sympathetic ones; they are at a loss to understand how protests against the police have spilled over into toppling statues. Why not focus on "policy outcomes" instead? Why bother with relics of the past? How does history matter? Removing a statue, some critics say, will change nothing.

What they don't see is that the struggles over the statues are battles over meaning, and to change the meaning of something is to change everything—precisely because humans are not brutes.

Whatever the Black Lives Matter movement may or may not achieve, it has already succeeded in making manifest the insistent vitality of the past. It has shown that the indifference to history that was once believed to be a prominent feature of American culture was never anything but an elite myth. Native Americans and African Americans were never indifferent to the past, not least because they had to deal with its legacies of violence in their daily lives. Every protest is an assertion that the planetary crisis is rooted in the past and cannot be understood without it.

"History," long used as a tool of subjugation, has spilled out of classrooms and museums and flowed into the streets. Ironically, this has been made possible by the very racism that lay concealed, as Immanuel Wallerstein noted, at the heart of the practice of writing "History." It is precisely because the history of the United States, and all the other so-called "historical nations," has been so closely studied that it has become impossible to conceal inconvenient truths. A narrative that began as a chronicle of the triumphant ascent of Western man has provided the tools for its own upending.

I am astonished and moved to see this happening before my eyes, on the streets around me; I had not thought I would see anything like this in my lifetime. It is proof of the human capacity for renewal through empathetic understanding.

I AM AT MY DESK, writing about statues and monuments, when I hear shouts from the street below and see a Black Lives Matter protest going by. I run out to join it, and find myself walking, in the midst of a mainly white crowd, to the monument that towers above Fort Greene Park, the Prison Ship Martyrs monument.

With shouts of "Black lives matter!" ringing through the park, I read the plaque that stands beside the monument. It tells me that the monument was built to commemorate the lives of 11,500

"men, women and children" lost in 1776, when the British captured this area from George Washington's Continental Army. Thousands of American captives were incarcerated on British prison ships, where they died of "overcrowding, contaminated water, starvation, and disease."

I recall, then, an episode from Indian history that is "probably as well-known in the English-speaking world as the fact that Napoleon was Emperor of France." In 1756, only twenty years before the death of the Prison Ship Martyrs, 123 English prisoners were said to have died, of overcrowding and asphyxiation, in the Indian prison that came to be known as the Black Hole of Calcutta. This story became a "founding myth of empire" and was used for centuries to justify British violence in India.

The trouble is, however, that there is no conclusive proof that the alleged atrocity ever took place. Over more than a century a great many scholars and historians have shown that the evidence for it is flimsy at best, and that if indeed there was a massacre, then the number of fatalities was less than half of what has been alleged. One such scholar, George W. Hartmann, was a professor at Columbia's Teachers College. In 1948, he published an article debunking the myth. It began by noting: "Almost every 'educated' adult within the English-speaking world has heard the story of the Black Hole of Calcutta, a minor event supposed to have happened one hot June nearly two hundred years ago in connection with the British conquest of India. Innumerable histories, major and minor, record the short but horrible tale; sober encyclopedias give it the respectable stamp of their authority; and more recently, solid medical, engineering, and psychological textbooks . . . have by their repeated references thereto all but universalized an awareness of this episode."

Monuments had much to do with the perpetuation of the story. In 1902, when the myth of the Black Hole had already been substantially debunked, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, had a monument built, at his own expense, to commemorate the event. "Confidently riding the global wave of high imperialism," writes Partha Chatterjee, "the British rulers once more installed the memory of their early victimhood in India."

The Black Hole of Calcutta thus became the one snippet of India's colonial history that was almost universally known in the English-speaking world. As an experiment, Professor Hartmann asked his students if they had heard of the Black Hole incident: of the 115 students, about one-third said they had, and that they believed the story to be "essentially true." The professor did not ask his students about either Amboyna or the Prison Ship Martyrs. Had he done so, I suspect some would have heard of the former, but very few would have known about the 11,500 Americans who died on British prison ships anchored off the shores of

Brooklyn. Even some eminent historians, I have discovered, are unaware of those deaths.

This is but one of many instances in which "History" as related by imperial chroniclers chose to foreground a story that could be turned into a tale of white English victimhood while obscuring another, much deadlier event that did not lend itself to that narrative. Empire, as the historian Priya Satia has remarked, has "made and remade the historical discipline."

THE QUESTIONS of who is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis.

At this moment in time, when we look back on the trajectory that has brought humanity to the brink of a planetary catastrophe, we cannot but recognize that our plight is a consequence of the ways in which certain classes of humans—a small minority, in fact—have actively muted others by representing them as brutes, as creatures whose presence on Earth is solely material. Because of these assumptions it was taken for granted that the greater part of humanity was intellectually and culturally incapable of industrializing—and that delusion is itself an essential component of the catastrophe now unfolding across the planet.

Would the West have embarked on its reckless use of resources if it had imagined that a day might come when the rest of the world would adopt the practices that enabled affluent countries to industrialize, just as the West had itself adopted innumerable non-Western practices and technologies? If this possibility had been acknowledged a century ago, then maybe some thought would have been given to the consequences. But through the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries it was an unstated assumption among those who ruled the world that most non-Westerners were simply too stupid, too brutish, to make the transition to industrial civilization on a mass scale. Concealed by abstractions, these assumptions undergirded a range of academic disciplines like development studies, and some branches of economics and sociology, in which poverty was ascribed to "culture," a term often laden with racial baggage. These assumptions have penetrated so deep into these disciplines that they can perhaps never be expunged.

It is perhaps only in the last two or three decades that the West has awakened to something that it had not imagined possible: that the non-West is fully capable of adopting extractive, carbon-intensive economies, and all that goes with them, like scientific and technological research and certain genres of art and literature. Had it been accepted earlier that human beings are, and have always been, essentially mimetic creatures, perfectly capable

of learning from one another, then perhaps sustainability would have become an urgent issue much earlier. But this possibility was precluded by long-held elite assumptions until the brutes began to unbrute themselves.

The terrible irony is that the unbruting of the middle classes of the non-West has been achieved precisely by repeating, and even intensifying, the processes of brutalization set in motion by Europe's colonial conquests. In India, over the last three decades, the beliefs, practices, and livelihoods of forest peoples have come under attack as never before. In hideous mimicries of the settler-colonial treatment of Indigenous peoples, more and more forest areas have been opened up to the mining and tourism industries, sometimes with the support of exclusionary conservationists who advocate the removal of forest dwellers in the name of ecology. Forest peoples' sacred mountains have been desecrated, their lands have been swamped by dams, and their beliefs and rituals have come under attack as "primitive superstitions"—exactly the terms once used by colonial

administrators, scientists, and missionaries. The replication of colonial practices extends even to removing tribal children to boarding schools. Similar processes are under way also in China, in relation to the Uighur, and in Indonesia, in relation to Papuans.

The difference is that these mimicries of colonial brutalization have unfolded not over centuries, but over a few decades, going back to 1990: half the greenhouse gases now in the atmosphere were emitted in the past thirty years. The tremendous acceleration brought about by the worldwide adoption of colonial methods of extraction and consumption has driven humanity to the edge of the precipice.

This compressed time frame has made sure that nonhumans too are no longer as mute as they once were. Other beings and forces—bacteria, viruses, glaciers, forests, the jet stream—have also un-muted themselves and are now thrusting themselves so exigently on our attention that they can no longer be ignored or treated as elements of an inert earth.

IT IS NOW beyond dispute, I think, that the Western scientists, philosophers, and intellectuals who believed that nonwhite peoples were by nature brutish, lacking in sensibility, and effectively mute were profoundly and utterly wrong. What, then, if they were wrong also about the inertness and brute materiality of what they called "Nature"? What if it was the people who were regarded by elite Westerners as brutes and savages—the people who could see signs of vitality, life, and meaning in beings of many other kinds—who were right all along? What if the idea that Earth teems with other beings who act, communicate, tell stories, and make meaning is taken seriously?

And why should this be unlikely? The Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose demonstrated long ago that plants can feel pain and fear, and even make audible responses to certain kinds of stimuli. His work was hugely celebrated for a while, but then the agents of official modernity struck back and silenced him as a "charlatan."

But now the procedures of official modernity have themselves uncovered communicative abilities in many kinds of

nonhumans, ranging from marine mammals and elephants to trees and forests. Perhaps the best known of these scientists is the famous primatologist Jane Goodall, who has described instances of communication with a male chimpanzee that she had named David Greybeard: "his large and lustrous eyes, set so wide apart . . . seemed somehow to express his entire personality. David taught me that so long as I looked into his eyes without arrogance, without any request, he did not mind. . . . His eyes seemed almost like windows through which, if only I had the skill, I could look into his mind."

Today it is possible for Banu Subramaniam, a plant scientist who studies morning glories, to ask questions that would have been thought outlandish a few years ago: "Who were the actors in my morning glory experiments? What of the plant itself? What of its agency? Its own history?"

Scientists now accept that trees in a forest are able to communicate with one another in certain circumstances—they can send help, in the form of carbon, to ailing members of their group;

MENECUM FUGIANDAM DOLOREP EROVID EVENDIA DIA NONSERA PRORE SCIT VELIBERUM ESERRO BERSPIENIM COMNI



and they can warn one another about pestilence and disease. It is now thought that certain plants can even emit sounds that are inaudible to the human ear but are audible to some other living things. So it is only in that they lack language—a human attribute—that trees are mute. But in that humans lack the ability to communicate as trees do, could it not be said that for a tree it is the human who is mute?

It may seem obvious to humans that their ability to destroy trees and forests endows them, and them alone, with the capacity to act. But intentional action can also unfold over completely different scales of time. Trees have inhabited Earth much longer than human beings, and their individual life spans are, in many cases, far greater than those of people: some live for thousands of years. If trees possessed modes of reasoning, their thoughts would be calibrated to a completely different timescale, perhaps one in which they anticipate that most humans will perish because of a planetary catastrophe. The world after such an event would be one in which trees would flourish as never before, on soil enriched by billions of decomposing human bodies. It may appear self-evident to humans that they are the gardeners who decide what happens to trees. Yet, on a different timescale, it might appear equally evident that trees are gardening humans. They may be the earthly equivalent of the oceanic superorganism of *Solaris*.

But perhaps this is all wrong? After all, trees and humans are not—or not just—adversaries competing for space. They are also linked by innumerable forms of cooperation. Perhaps what is at fault here is the very idea of a single species. It is now known that the human body contains vast numbers of microorganisms of various kinds; biologists estimate that 90 percent of the human body consists of bacteria, rather than human cells, and one microbiologist has suggested that under a microscope a human body looks like a coral reef, “an assemblage of life-forms living together.” It is known also that microorganisms influence moods, emotions, and the human ability to reason. So if it is true that the human ability to speak, and think, can only be actualized in the presence of other species, can it really be said that these faculties belong exclusively to humans?

Recent research in biology has shown that many species do not evolve singly: bacteria are critical to the survival of animals of all kinds, including humans. “More and more,” according to a team of biologists, “symbiosis appears to be the ‘rule,’ not the exception. . . . Nature may be selecting ‘relationships’ rather than individuals or genomes.” Many organisms are born without the bacteria that are essential for them to attain adulthood; they must encounter those bacteria in the world—and without those meetings they are unable to fully realize their potential.

Could it not be said of humans too that the presence of certain

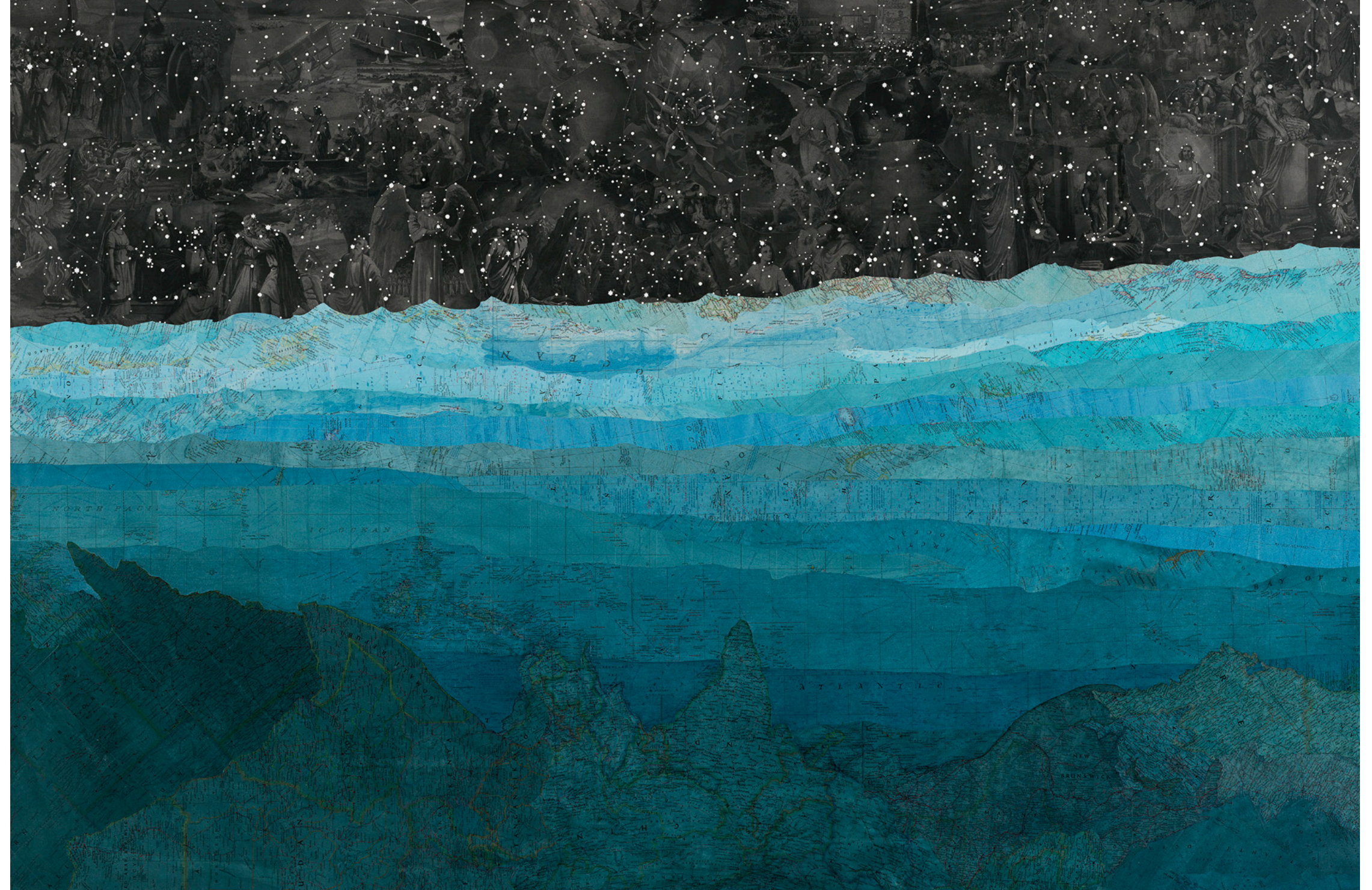
other species, in specific moments of encounter, has enabled *Homo sapiens* to transcend their limitations? Take for instance that landmark moment in the history of consciousness when the Buddha attained Enlightenment: this event occurred, as is well known, while the Buddha was meditating under a Bodhi tree. Within the Buddhist tradition, for more than two thousand years, the presence of this tree has been inseparable from that

moment. This is not to say that the tree transmits illumination, or even that it is an active participant in the process. Nor is it at all the case that everyone who meditates under a Bodhi tree will achieve Enlightenment.

Yet it has long been accepted, by many millions of people, that a trans-species encounter, at a specific historical juncture, was essential to the Enlightenment of one particular human, Prince

Siddhartha Gautama. The Buddha himself believed the tree to be essential to his attaining Enlightenment, which is why millions of Buddhists consider the Bodhi tree sacred to this day. In the words of the Dalai Lama:

*Under a tree was the great Sage Buddha born.
Under a tree, he overcame passion*



MENECUM FUGIANDAM DOLOREP EROVID EVENDIA DIA NONSERA PRORE SCIT VELIBERUM ESERRO BERSPIENIM COMNI



MENECEM FUGIANDAM DOLOREP EROVID EVENDIA DIA NONSERA PRORE SCIT VELIBERUM ESERRO BERSPIENIM COMNI

*And attained enlightenment
Under two trees did he pass into Nirvana.*

What does this tell us? It tells us, first of all, that certain kinds of trans-species associations cannot be understood with the methods of science. They are encounters, or events, that occur at

specific moments in time and are not repeatable. Such encounters can only be approached historically, by attending to the circumstances in which they occur.

Second, it tells us that an awareness of the possibility of trans-species encounters of this sort has always existed among humans. We need only think of St. Francis of Assisi and the story

of how he subdued the man-eating wolf of Gubbio. “Brother wolf,” he is reported to have said, “All men cry out against thee, the dogs pursue thee, and all the inhabitants of this city are thy enemies; but I will make peace between them and thee, O brother wolf . . . and neither men nor dogs shall pursue thee any more.” This encounter had many witnesses, and tradition has it

that the citizens of Gubbio eventually buried the wolf’s corpse in a church named after St. Francis. Five and a half centuries later, in 1872, when the church was under repair, a wolf’s corpse was found buried under it.

It takes only a moment’s reflection to recognize that innumerable men and women have made claims to communications with nonhumans—animals, volcanoes, trees, gods, demons, angels, and indeed God. Although many of these claimants may have been frauds and charlatans, some—like St. Francis—were among the most venerated figures of their time: human society and human history would be incomprehensible without these figures. But the claims they made cannot be understood or apprehended through the forms of reasoning that are dominant today, simply because they cannot be replicated or empirically verified. Contemporary reason requires anyone who makes a claim of communication with nonhumans to provide evidence of these interactions. That condition necessarily excludes anyone who says: “A nonhuman spoke to me, and only me, just once, when I was in an altered state of mind, and what was communicated by this nonhuman was not something useful, nor something verifiable: it was instead only a story.”

Yet most such claims are couched in exactly these terms: they are not repeatable at will; they occur in unique circumstances and often in altered states of mind; and the traces that they leave behind are not observable effects in the real world, but rather stories, which in turn come to be enshrined in texts, icons, and rituals. So the true question then is not whether nonhumans can communicate and make meaning; rather, we must ask: When and how did a small group of humans come to believe that other beings, including the majority of their own species, were incapable of articulation and agency? How were they able to establish the idea that nonhumans are mute, and without minds, as the dominant wisdom of the time?

AN ESSENTIAL STEP toward the silencing of nonhuman voices was to imagine that only humans are capable of telling stories. This again is not an idea that people have always subscribed to; many, perhaps most, of the world’s people still don’t. It is essentially another elite idea that gained ground with the onward march of the mechanistic metaphysic. Yet today the idea that humans are the only storytelling animals appears self-evident to those who subscribe to it.

Consider, for instance, this passage from one of the finest portrayals of a landscape in contemporary literature, Graham Swift’s superb 1983 novel, *Waterland*. “[O]nly animals,” says one of Swift’s characters, “live entirely in the Here and Now.

Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories.”

This passage serves as the epigraph for a fine article by the environmental historian William Cronon. The article is on the nature of narrative, and Cronon argues that the fundamental difference between a mere succession of events (a “chronology”) and a story is that the latter joins events together in a way that invests them with meaning. This, he assumes, is a specifically human ability, hence: “Narrative is a peculiarly human way of organizing reality.” So, once again, what is really at stake is not so much storytelling itself, but rather the question of who can make meaning. Once again the assumption is that nonhumans cannot make, or discern, meaning.

On a different timescale, it might appear equally evident that trees are gardening humans.

As with so many other attempts to define the exceptionalism of human beings, this idea is tenable only if meaning-making and storytelling are defined in a circular fashion, as being tied to human forms of language. But is it really the case that experiences cannot have any meaning in the absence of language? Clearly this does not obtain for prelinguistic humans: it is well known that even infants understand, and make, many kinds of meaning. So why should it not be possible to connect experiences into meaningful patterns in other ways, through memory, sight, or smell, for instance? Any pet owner knows that a dog understands as meaningful the relationship between the home, the park, and certain times of day. For the dog, is this a “chronology” or a “narrative”? Either way, it is clearly not the case that the dog lives “entirely in the here and now”; its experiences are sequential and are understood to unfold in time and space.

The importance of sequencing will be evident to anyone who has ever tried to write a story: a narrative is nothing if not an arrangement of a sequence of events. This is why the sentences that connect one paragraph to another are of such vital importance: they provide the sequential connections between events and places, out of which a meaningful narrative emerges. This kind of narrative sequencing is analogous

to movement through time, as well as space: that is exactly what is meant by the “unfolding” of a story. That may account for why so many of the world’s earliest and most powerful narratives are stories that unfold through movement: for example, the *Ramayana*, the *Odyssey*, the Norse sagas, the *Journey to the West*, and so on.

It is well established now that many animals have long memories and are able to communicate in complex ways. Some of these animals, like elephants, whales, and migratory birds, also move over immense distances and appear to have attachments to particular places. These movements cannot be described as purely mechanical, instinctive, or lacking in meaningful sequences. Humpback whales, for instance, mark the passage of time by changing their songs from year to year. This would hardly be possible if they lived “entirely in the Here and Now.”

As far back as the 1930s, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll demonstrated that many animals actively interpret their surroundings, creating their own experiential worlds. This idea has long been anathema to those who believe that attributing human qualities to animals is a cardinal error. But, as Eileen Crist has so persuasively shown in her book *Images of Animals: Anthropomorphism and Animal Mind*, to rigorously avoid anthropomorphism is only to risk falling into the related fallacy of mechanomorphism—the assumption that animals are machinelike creatures that cannot, in principle, be endowed with minds or interpretive faculties.

In short, there are many good reasons to conclude, as Donna Haraway does, that “Storying cannot any longer be put into the box of human exceptionalism.” The anthropologist Thom van Dooren goes further. In a fascinating study of a flock of penguins who doggedly return, year after year, to the shores of a Sydney suburb, he concludes that the birds’ attachment to the place arises out of “storying.” He writes: “experiencing beings like penguins ‘represent’ the world to themselves, too: they do not just take in sensory data as unfiltered and meaningless phenomena, but weave meaning out of experiences, so that they, like humans, ‘inhabit an endlessly storied world.’”

It would seem then that the idea that humans are the only storytelling animals is by no means an unproblematic reflection of reality. It is something that some people like to believe, just as some once believed that most humans were brutes and thus incapable of making meaning. It is, in other words, a construct, one that is intimately connected with structures of power and with the forceful repression of the awareness of nonhuman forms of agency and expression. Not surprisingly, in this matter, too, the hand of power has often fallen hardest on Indigenous people.

When we think of the suppression of stories today, our minds leap immediately to dissident literature and authoritarian regimes. Yet other kinds of stories were also suppressed, or repressed, for quite different reasons over much longer spans of time—for example, the hummah-hah narratives of the Laguna Pueblo. In Leslie Marmon Silko’s words, these stories are about the conversations that “coyotes, crows and buzzards used to have with human beings.” In her memoir, *The Turquoise Ledge*, Silko recalls how, in her childhood, hummah-hah stories could not be mentioned in certain public spaces because they revealed the “Laguna spiritual outlook toward animals, plants and spirit beings.” The stories existed in the shadows, as a secret lore.

It is perfectly possible, then, that far from being an exclusively human attribute, the narrative faculty is the most *animal* of human abilities, a product of one of the traits that humans indisputably share with animals and many other beings—attachments to place. Perhaps, then, storytelling, far from setting humans apart from animals, is actually the most important residue of our formerly wild selves. This would explain why stories, above all, are quintessentially the domain of human imaginative life in which nonhumans had voices, and where nonhuman agency was fully recognized and even celebrated. To make this leap may be difficult in other, more prosaic domains of thought, but it was by no means a stretch in the world of storytelling, where anything is possible.

The shrinking of the possibilities of this domain, and the consequent erasure of nonhuman voices from “serious” literature, has played no small part in creating that blindness to other beings that is so marked a feature of official modernity. It follows, then, that if those nonhuman voices are to be restored to their proper place, then it must be, in the first instance, through the medium of stories.

This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans. As with all the most important artistic endeavors in human history, this is a task at once aesthetic and political—and because of the magnitude of the crisis that besets the planet, it is now freighted with the most pressing moral urgency. ○

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Corvus

My wife thinks the crows
are talking to her
with their midnight beaks
and ragged feathers
and maybe she sees the sky though their eyes
the reef of dark storm cloud
off to the west, the flutter
of deep laughter under her breast
and under their bandaged squawks

and I’m thankful for the privilege
of memory and thought
for I still wear the scar on my hand
from setting steel steps
onto the trailers
my first week in Dead Horse
near Prudhoe Bay
back when we still had an Arctic,
where a can of soda
left outside for three minutes
would freeze into solid ice:

ice in the air, ice in the sky,
ice in our nostrils and under our eyes:
who knew some day we would miss it?
Ice-tears and ice-spit
ice-piss and ice-shit
so cold you couldn’t smell,
glare-ice like the front yard of hell

and the first living creature a raven
perched on the trash burner
with a voice like bent tin
under the delicate rose-colored sun
which never lifted above the horizon
circling all day like a dim lamp
along the gray edge of heaven.

—Joseph Milar