

# Bound with Bright Beautiful Things

CAROLINE PICARD

DEEP TIME  
C H I C A G O

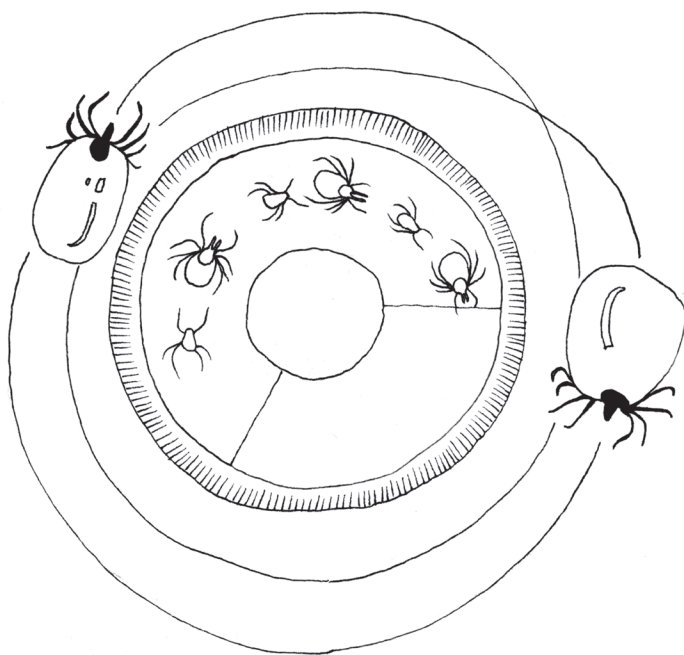
**DEEP TIME CHICAGO** is an art/research/activism initiative formed in the wake of the Anthropocene Curriculum program at HKW in Berlin, Germany. The initiative's goal is to explore one core idea: humanity as a geological agency, capable of disrupting the earth system and inscribing present modes of existence into deep time. By knitting together group readings, guided walks, lectures, panels, screenings, performances, publications and exhibitions, we hope to develop a public research trajectory, offering a variety of formats where Chicago area inhabitants can grapple with the crucial questions of global ecological change.

**DEEPTIMECHICAGO.ORG**

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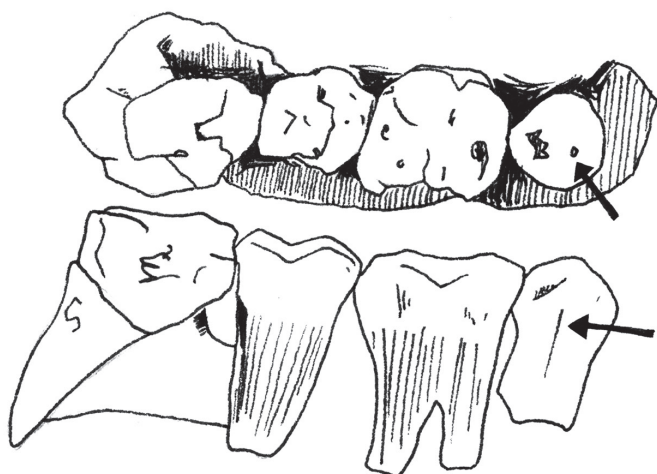
SIX TO EIGHT + BACK AGAIN

Moreover, here in this forest, we  
hear a variety of sounds ... so many  
... mere sounds. That's all they  
are; they should not cause fear  
to anyone. We hear the rumbling of  
clouds, the whistling of wind in  
the reeds, we hear sounds of lutes  
and drums, big and small, sounds  
of conches and bells, of wagons  
and doors, creaking, sounds of axes  
and saws and similar implements—all  
kinds of sounds are heard here. One  
should not be afraid of them.

VIṢṆU ŚARMA, *THE PANCHATANTRA*, (~3 BCE).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When referencing this work, I have used the scholarly translation of Visnu Śarma's, *The Panchatantra*, trans. Chandra Rajan (London: Penguin Classics, 1993) 30. In this edition, there is an accent " ´ " above the "c" in the book's title; to help English readers, this has been transliterated hereafter as a "ch," following other translations of the same work.



There is always a time before, the second/minute/hour/day/week/month/year before, a preceding generation, an older dynasty. Each human occasion is locked within a larger suite where instants fall on the page of our collective and singular imaginations like notes on a score. We acknowledge a darker, deeper time from which we must have emerged—the stuff of myth, divination, philosophy, and theory. Adam Smith drew hunters and shepherds from this amorphous past to produce a theory of capital and society in *The Wealth of Nations*. Archaeologists unearth artifacts in anthropological digs with parallel intensity, puzzling over the teeth of Neanderthals where isotopes in dental plaque reveal traces of raw aspirin and *Penicillium*.<sup>2</sup> Or the virtual, scientific models—studies and projections that aim to uncover a point of origin (a bang for instance) after which life began and then diversified. Yet rather than lock this point of geologic departure in time, the world instead recedes into the past of human knowledge, growing exponentially older as scientific tools become more sophisticated.

*In the early seventeenth century Galileo's telescope helped place our planet in a solar system unimaginably more vast than the geocentric vision. The cozy closed universe gave way to seemingly endless space. A similar expansion of the temporal axis had to wait until later. The best informed scientific opinion in seventeenth-century Europe thought the earth around 6,000 years old... By the time of Kant in the late eighteenth century, or that of Charles Lyell,*

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<sup>2</sup> “Dental plaque DNA shows Neanderthals used ‘aspirin’”, Science Daily, March 2017; at <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170308131218.htm>.

*the chief founder of modern geology, in the early nineteenth, it was becoming clear the earth had been around for at least tens or hundreds of millions of years, up to the more recent estimate of about five billion years. The discovery of what Stephen Jay Gould (1987) has called "deep time" started to take hold at a popular level—unevenly, of course, as the ongoing presence of young-earth creationists attests—in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>*

We grope to position the human on a timeline, as though to arrive at some essential argument with which to inform dilemmas at hand—even if the full significance of this more than human trajectory remains impossible to access, divorced as it is (like any god) from the trenches of individual experience. A precept of this study is to privilege the human as a main event, and in so doing establish an assumed distance between man and everything else. We study the earth's record with the distance of a reader, or imagine some divine source fashioned our bodies in its image using earth as though it was simply a haphazard material, or, alternately, because we cannot yet articulate the precise border between human and ape and thus look into the eyes of our beastly cousins with an uncanny sense of estranged kinship. There is a basic flaw in our species' conception of diplomacy as a result, for it neglects the independent politics of surrounding creatures in favor of its own exceptionalism.

*"So there really are more things in heaven and earth than in our anthropological dream."<sup>4</sup>*

*The Panchatantra* presents an alternate view, collecting ancient, oral Aesopian-like fables into a single volume. Allegedly transcribed by Viṣṇu Śarma, the book's authorship is murky. "His name occurs in the preamble to the text, nowhere else."<sup>5</sup> The identity of the author and the premise of the book are inextricably linked; both emerge for an old king with three sons. He admits their ignorance and begs his councilors make them wise. "Far better that a man have

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<sup>3</sup> John Durham Peters, "Space, Time, and Communication Theory," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 28, No 4 (2003); at <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1389/1467>.

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Chandra Rajan, in *The Panchatantra*, Forward.



no sons born / or, that born they die; though there be grief it passes soon; / But to have living sons, who turn out fools, / and obstinate fools at that, that indeed / is a lifelong misery to bear.”<sup>6</sup> *The Panchatantra* is set up as an antidote to ignorance and idiocy, particularly as it pertains to diplomatic affairs. As such, Śarma’s role as author is to organize and edit according to this agenda.

*To this request of the king, Viṣṇu Śarma replied, “My lord, I do not sell my learning, not even for the gift of a hundred land-grants. Now hear me speak; I speak the simple, unvarnished truth. I have no craving for wealth, my lord. I am now eighty years of age, and my senses have turned away from their objects. But I shall do what you ask of me. If I do not teach your sons in such a manner that in six months time they do not have complete mastery over all the wide expanse of political and practical wisdom, then let my name be thrown away and forgotten.”*<sup>7</sup>

The narrator continues, explaining that Śarma’s promise was kept, thus imbuing the compiled stories with the promise of wisdom. To achieve this wisdom, he composed five books of stories (“The Estrangement of Friends,” “The Winning of Friends,” “Of Crows and Owls,” “Loss of Gains,” and “Rash Deeds”), which, once read and studied by the princes, engendered their political wisdom enabling them to rule.

Every section provides a frame within which sub-stories emerge. While the overarching world of the whole book remains constant, it is difficult to anticipate the narrative’s course, traversing as it does such a broad stratum of interlocking microcosms. Each of these sites contains its own dilemmas enacted by more than human constituents reflecting both the world they inhabit and their corresponding perspectives. A creature in one story-world regularly interrupts the flow of its own narrative arc to tell an anecdote from another story-world involving other life forms. The result of this tapestry is disorienting and occasionally feels incomplete if one thread is abandoned for an extended period, lost to the momentum of other narratives. Additionally, every tale is punctuated at multiple points by aphoristic poems that guide the characters’ action.

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<sup>6</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātāntra*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātāntra*, 5.

*To pick up a bit of glass cut to catch light  
and sparkle, mistaking it for a sapphire:  
O! How vain and useless!*<sup>8</sup>

At first these creatures seem like vehicles for Śarma's poetic messages—strategies to contextualize and therefore instill bits of wisdom upon the reader. But the messages are not consistent. Aphorisms don't emerge from an objective voice permeating the whole collection of stories. Instead, the aphorisms offer shifting but practical insights that characters use like furniture, to move around or sit upon; the wisdom-of-the-day is a tool to assess their respective predicaments. Sometimes protagonists go against their better judgment or weigh two contradicting suggestions against one another. They win good fortune at one turn—a seeming testimony to the strength of the wisdom at hand—while becoming casualties of popular advice in another, as though their insights were misguided. Readers have a luxury of distance, and can thus recognize how chance plays as much a part of every outcome as the character's personality, circumstance, and insight.

So it goes with Crawly, a bedbug who fails to adhere to custom:

*In the inner apartments of the palace of a certain king there stood a couch incomparable, furnished with all imaginable beauties and comforts. A coverlet was spread over it and on the coverlet lived a bedbug named Crawly. Surrounded by her large extended family of sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters, and sundry other kin, she bit the king when he was fast asleep and sucked his blood. Richly fed by blood she grew really plump; she was a striking bedbug indeed.*<sup>9</sup>

Drone, a wasp, pays Crawly a visit. "I have tasted the blood of all four classes: priests and teachers, warriors and rulers, merchants and traders, peasants and workers," Drone says. He begs her to let him taste the blood of her king—a blood still beyond his experience—describing it as "the elixir of life."<sup>10</sup> Crawly denies the wasp at first but, rather than anger the gods by refusing another's excessive humility, ultimately gives in.

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<sup>8</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 105.

She lets Drone stay, provided he bite the king on his feet and only once he has fallen to sleep. Despite these instructions, the wasp bites the still-awake king on his back. “The king was startled as if he had been bitten by the fiery point of a meteor; as if he had been touched by a live firebrand; as if he had been stung by a scorpion; he jumped up and then sat down.”<sup>11</sup> The King has his couch examined, finds Crawly hiding in a fold of fabric, and kills her with her family. The wasp, meanwhile, flies away unscathed. Despite the seeming authority of Crawly’s insight, she does not see that Drone shares neither her priorities nor limitations. Although one could make another corrective aphorism—for instance, as Wily, jackal and narrator of the story says, “Never grant asylum to one who is not known to you”<sup>12</sup>—cases would arrive to either disprove the rule or force one to disregard it.

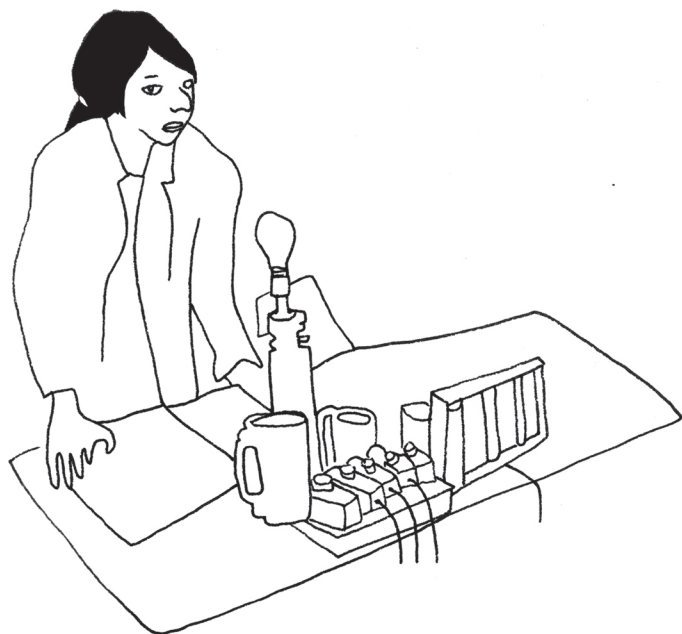
Crawly’s tale is not only significant because of its don’t-spoil-a-good-thing message, but also because it adeptly captures a stratum of various wills in one brief interlude. It first captures the influence of a king’s world and the stories that support it. Crawly bases her decision on “The short tale of Muladeva, son of Karni and prince of confidence tricksters,” a story overheard as it was told to the King while “she lay snugly ensconced in a corner of the coverlet, listening.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, we see how stories transmit through the strata of species. Similarly, through the physical appetite of wasps and bedbugs, we are presented with a King’s biological interiority, calling forth another, inner space that applies to all creatures. Crawly and Drone each share an appetite for human blood, but they may not consider that appetite in the same way. Nor does the reader access their respective inner lives. Thus, *The Panchatantra* captures a vast and teeming multitude in which thousands of potential wills toss around, layer, and influence one another through conflict and resolution, even as each subject references inherited advice. It is the cohesion of the overarching framework that remains so remarkable, narrating as it does an epic ecological web that humanity can—at least intuitively—begin to see. Conceiving this, according to Śarma, is the start to diplomacy.

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<sup>11</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 107.



Traditionally, western society sees itself in a singular, independent frame of reference. Even if we grasp our position within a network of data, commerce, and politics, we tend to differentiate the human individual from its biological entourage. The human is front and center with the landscape as a backdrop. This individual further identifies herself as distinct from the animal. Part animal and part divine, a species capable of language, capable of conceiving its own death, she possesses a deep cultural and historical inheritance. Nevertheless, while those attributes might at first appear like signs of a unique species capacity, the promiscuity of these traits emerge through examination: in every instance, there is another creature that shares something of our nature. "Up until the eighteenth century, language—which would become man's identifying characteristic par excellence—jumps across orders and classes, for it is suspected that even birds can talk."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps because of our inability to answer this peculiar question about human essence, we are heavily invested in proving our superior and unique potential over and over again. Perhaps it this obsession with our own exceptionalism that fundamentally erodes the human capacity for geopolitics.

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben examines where and how humanity defines itself with respect to its animal cousins. The distance between "us" and "them" is not so extreme. Halfway through his book, Agamben cites historical naturalist Jakob von Uexküll. Uexküll rejects a single biological world of progressing life forms that share a common purpose and experience. He does not subscribe to the vision that life forms commiserate on survival in the same way, a way that would pit themselves against one another. In his view, human-kind is not necessarily the apex. Rather, Uexküll imagines an infinite variety of realities, or "perceptual worlds" (*umwelts*). For the most part, those worlds do not communicate; they can be reciprocally exclusive while still relating to one another at discrete instances. You could imagine that they observe the same time signature while being unaware of one another's melody—they are "chromatic" as Viveiros de Castro would say, creating a metaphor with music, language, and the simultaneity of life.<sup>15</sup> To stick with the musical metaphor for a moment, if each species lives in its own envelope of filtered experience, it cannot see the larger life-opera it contributes to, even while it intervenes and interacts with that

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<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 45.

trajectory as a chromatic, or atypical exception to the musical scale in which it is contextualized. In this respect, Uexküll's creatures operate very much like the creatures in Śarma's *Panchatantra*, intersecting at various points in time, often at seeming odds with one another as if to produce strange and dissonant encounters that nevertheless *add up*, propelling independent and uncoordinated agendas through a single book. Somehow this book manages to hold together, and like the world it depicts, sustains everything within it.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than read *The Panchatantra* as a book that borrows the animal form to reveal something essential about the human world, let's take these creatures seriously and suppose instead that the various species depicted actually represent themselves. With this premise in mind—if the animals are not allegories, but actually animals—*The Panchatantra* becomes a snapshot of the infinite variety of different *umwelts* negotiating one another. The narrative structure and language are tools to translate this variety of life forms into human terms that then provide the reader access to different but simultaneous perceptual realities. The book therefore provides a portal into otherwise inaccessible biological strata, conveying an interstitial existence—the web of life that humans, stones, rabbits, amoebas, robots, and trees hold in common.

Agamben describes how the fly cannot physically perceive the spider web—that each *umwelt* of spider and fly, while being inextricably linked, exclude one another. These two perceptual worlds “are absolutely uncommunicating, and yet so perfectly in tune that we might say that the original score of the fly, which we can also call its original image or archetype, acts on that of the spider in such a way that the web the spider weaves can be described as ‘fly-like.’ Though the spider can in no way see the *umwelt* of the fly ... the web expresses the paradoxical coincidence of this reciprocal blindness.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to

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<sup>16</sup> The original quote I believe Viveiros de Castro is referencing comes from Deleuze and Guattari: “The atypical expression constitutes a cutting edge of deterritorialization of language, it plays the role of *tensor*, in other words, it causes language to tend toward the limit of its elements, forms, or notions, toward a near side or beyond of language. The tensor effects a kind of transitivity of the phrase, causing the last term to react upon the preceding term, back through the entire chain. It assures an intensive and chromatic treatment of language.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 110.

<sup>17</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, 42.

describe the tick, a creature that aspires with its entire being to suck blood despite lacking a variety of senses: sight, hearing, and taste. Nor can it jump, and must therefore climb a high branch and wager chance, waiting until proximate biochemical signals indicate the approach of a warm-blooded animal. Upon recognizing this smell, the insect hurls itself off the tree or blade of grass into the dark of unknowns, (so hopeful it seems) to latch (if it is lucky) on a body, drink, and (days later sometimes) let go, falling to the ground. As though fulfilled, it molts, grows legs, or (depending on its life cycle) lays eggs, only to wait again for a passing creature. It needs a new animal at each stage of its life cycle and often transmits diseases between the animals on which it feeds.

Because it cannot taste, the tick drinks any fluid at body-temperature and is thus aimed at one purpose, an end towards which its few senses conspire. Like Crawly in Šarma's text, Uexküll's tick is also reliant on and entwined with the lives of countless other chances and occasions, not the least of which is the warm beast upon the forest path. In pursuit of its end, the tick is set upon a sequence of events: birth, development, breeding, climbing onto foliage (blindly), waiting with hunger, smelling, hurtling, descent, fulfillment or failure, death. Agamben describes one tick that allegedly lived for eighteen years in a dark laboratory, waiting for a body to suck. This tick appeared to exist outside of time, in a kind of liminal space, lacking the capacity to measure the span of its experience. It was totally divorced from outside (and changing) influence. But, Agamben posits, what is time to such a creature? "How is it possible for a living being that consists entirely in relation to its environment to survive in absolute deprivation of that environment? And what sense does it make to speak of 'waiting' without time and without world?"<sup>18</sup> Such a creature is not *being* but instead occupied, somehow, in a dormant state of potential; presumably this suspended state of *could be* facilitated the tick's exceptionally long life span.

Agamben's description of this creature's world, the facets of animal planes, and even, the impossible desire of humanity to define the bounds between itself and the animal kingdom, is what *The Panchatantra* also describes: a fluidity of life forms and beings, in which illusions, narratives, and *moirés* clash. This too is where Viveiros de Castro offers additional insight in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*, beginning with a fundamental precept that each creature sees itself as human. "Why is it that animals see themselves as humans? Precisely because we

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<sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, 47.

humans see them as animals, while seeing ourselves as humans.” As such the privilege of humanness becomes a function of subjective proximity. Rather than suggest a full-fledged relativism, however—where each creature sees itself as central within its own subjective world—Viveiros de Castro explains the world itself to be constant, even as the subjective beholders shift.

*Animals rely on the same “categories” and “values” as humans: their worlds revolve around hunting, fishing, food, fermented beverages, cross-cousins, war, initiation rites, shamans, chiefs, spirits... If the moon, serpents, and jaguars see humans as tapirs or peccaries, this is because, just like us, they eat tapirs and peccaries (human food par excellence). Things could not be otherwise since nonhumans, being human in their own right, see things as humans do—as we do in our own domain. But the things they see when they see them like we do are different; what we take for blood, jaguars see as beer...<sup>19</sup>*

Although his Amerindian philosophy has its own unique agenda, some of Viveiros de Castro’s propositions shed additional light upon Uexküll and Śarma. To return to the story of Crawly and Drone, there is a way in which each regards the other as a stranger to such an extent that their respective, predisposed conditions limit a capacity for mutual understanding. To put it another way, Viveiros de Castro says “the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as ‘activated’ or ‘agencied’ by a point of view.”<sup>20</sup> The variations of humanness, however, result from variations of body. “Animals perceive in the same way as us but perceive different things than we do, because their bodies are different.” This body (or “bundle of affects and capacities”) would seem to yield the *umwelt* Uexküll describes.

By virtue of its narrative capacity, *The Panchatantra* is able to demonstrate the ways in which multiple *umwelts* overlap and exhibit mutual awareness, even while excluding full reciprocal comprehension: for instance, that Crawly’s normative, earthbound state makes her risks different from Drone’s. The failure then is not from her inability to extract and apply the right aphorism, but to see how she and her guest occupy different but necessarily intertwined conditions.

<sup>19</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 72.



Georges Aperghis wrote an opera about evolution, unifying the existence and progression of multiple life forms within one musical program. In the same way that *The Panchatantra* embraces dissonant logic through contradictory aphorisms, Aperghis' opera presents coherence and incoherence within one libretto. Entirely in French, the piece is composed for five women, who, in its 2012 American debut through Joria Productions, walk on stage wearing lab coats and goggles. One carries a cello. After taking her seat apart from the others, the cellist explains that there is no beginning, no time "before," but that we must look to immediate forms to discover human nature.

*In the beginning, in the beginning, there was not a beginning. The common ancestor is unknown. Between each species and the common ancestor, who is unknown, one must seek, forever seek the intermediate forms.*<sup>21</sup>

Drawing on both Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and *Wonderful Life* by Stephen Jay Gould, *Sextuor: L'origine des espèces* transposes and performs music of a multi-species world history. With those texts as an anchor and the ever-present counterbalance of the cello (the only instrument the opera calls for), viewers watch the history of life unfold through music. The script periodically describes a "non-sensical interlude"—denoting passages of sound comprised primarily of phonemes. The singers produce gibberish with such conviction as to infuse it with a sense of purpose, making the audience privy to an arduous but ad hoc effort of discovery and production. Much of the sound occurs hysterical, harpy-like, and unformed, capturing evolution as an experiment that mostly fails to congeal. The five performers fall extraordinarily into (and out of) sync as our cellist maintains her seat on the side for the duration of the piece, interjecting sensible, philosophical statements—many of which come directly from Darwin's text.

This is another way to experience the chromatistic simultaneity of life; rather than read it through Šarma's conflicting advice, Aperghis' audience hears evolution as a relationship between (predominant) nonsense and (exceptions of) sense. But the nonsense is important.

*Pragmatically, an ethics of expression involves producing "atypical expressions."... "Agrammaticality" brings out the tensile dimension of language by stretching its elements beyond the limit of their*

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<sup>21</sup> Georges Aperghis, *Sextuor: L'origine des espèces*.

known forms and conventional functions. The atypical language pulls language into a direct contact with its own futurity. It forcibly twists it into glints of forms, hints of contents, as-yet functionless functions which, however "unmotivated" or "arbitrary," could be. Because they just were, after a fashion (germinally). The atypical expression puts the screws on the system of language in a way that forces its actual operation to overlap with its zone of potential.<sup>22</sup>

While syncopation appears perilous and unstable in *Sextuor: L'origine des espèces*, the score rewards the ear. For at such times when the phonemes congeal, spreading amongst the singers in a harmonic union, a new species emerges. "We are in the Age of Arthropods, in the fossiliferous rocks the oldest have suddenly appeared the species belonging to the great divisions of animals. But we are in the Age of Arthropods, far more numerous than Mammals."<sup>23</sup>

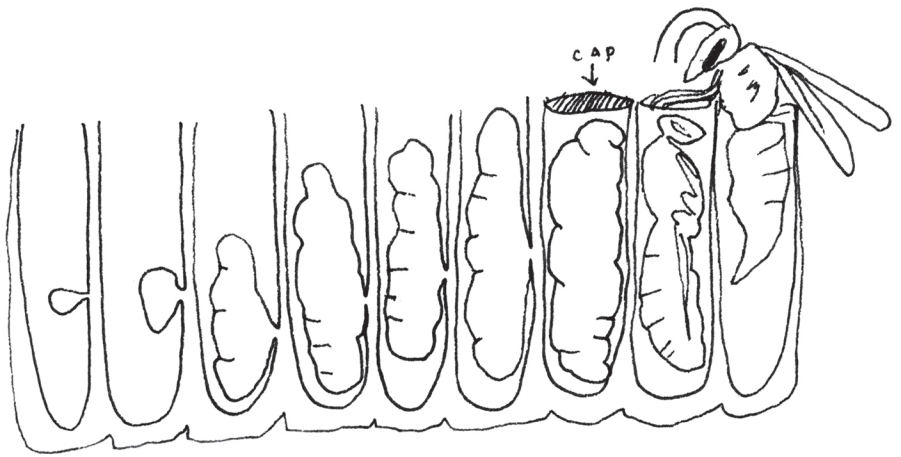
Over the course of this production, the singers describe a myriad of life's successful and historic forms—beings simpler and older than those encountered in *The Panchatantra*. Some creatures barely possess locomotion, yet they appear musically as though conjured from that space before human time. Although the performers act out brief, clipboard presentations of each life form as it is named, the signified objectivity of their lab coats collapses into parody. Like fish swimming in water, the performers seem unaware of the music they inhabit, focusing on pronunciation and discovery, rather than seeing the extraordinary progression in which they are implicated.

Operas engage historical or mythological themes whereas oratorios traditionally deal with sacred material; they are often produced in churches and require little in the way of sets. *Sextuor: l'origine des espèces* is the latter, using a secular, scientific tradition as a sacred platform, conjuring the feel of an origin story within the terminology of science. It incorporates colloquial myth, telling the Cinderella story between the music of birds and the introduction of fish. Additionally, the characters interact very little aside from their musical contributions, and the interactions that exist appear vaguely incidental, like scientists performing conference presentations. That incidental interaction parallels

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<sup>22</sup> Brian Massumi, "Introduction," *A Shock to Thought: Expressions after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi, (London: Routledge, 2002), xxii–xxiii.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Aperghis, *Sextuor: L'origine des espèces*.



these inter-species relations, and yet the peculiar unfolding, the unavoidable progression of life finds an easy metaphor in musical composition.

Still, we are bound in time with all the other bright and beautiful things. We rely on books, oral accounts, mythic tradition, and scores of music—accounts that must close, like lifetimes with beginnings and ends. Biographies conclude with the demise of their subjects and a performance like *Sextuor*—based on the fleeting occasion of life—must therefore account for its own disappearance. Nothing lasts forever. Suddenly humanity's advantage—its peculiar capacity to tell a story—seems especially mistaken in its privilege. We feel an imminent darkness. The stage goes black after a particularly moving solo during which Love describes the pleasure of being alive:

*But I, I was truly having fun. I whirl about as if drunk. I understood that I was carrying a great weight on my shoulders. I have an explanation for the beginnings of life on Earth. I understood that I was already lucky to be a living being.*<sup>24</sup>

Following her song (she has taken off her lab coat and wears only a dress), the other performers gather in a circle, joining hands around a single light. The cellist puts down her bow and joins the others, who must open their circle to admit her.

*O, you who listen to me tell this story full of memories and holes, we are that improbable and fragile species heading toward extinction and the extinction of all species, internal causes, external causes, I do not know, we the original species that tells the story of its origins full of holes and gaps, because we have so few documents, an incomplete story of the Earth in an ever-changing dialect, of which we have but the last volume, some fragments of its chapters and some lines of its pages or some letters, and words of uncertain meaning! Immense Nature improbable and unpredictable, contingent nature, where are we going, we who say life was wonderful, we who say life is wonderful?*<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Georges Aperghis, *Sextuor: L'origine des Espèces*.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Aperghis, *Sextuor: L'origine des Espèces*.

The audience sits in the dark, feeling. Although one world has ended, applause resounds. The house lights turn up. One by one the performers come out to bow. Then they bow together. What will the next world look like? What wisdom does it require?

At one point in *The Panchatantra*—and also according to Wily the Jackal<sup>26</sup>—immortal gods step in without making themselves apparent to the humans they influence. A weaver of the lowest caste falls in love with a princess. To woo her in secret, he convinces his best friend and chariot-maker to build a flying machine. With that carriage, and having dressed himself in the manner of a god, the Weaver visits the princess at night. “She saw the form of Lord Visnu mounted on the divine eagle in the sky.”<sup>27</sup> By claiming to marry her according to the rules of the gods, he convinces her to sleep with him, asking that she keep their union secret. Invariably, the Princess confesses everything to her parents. They are overjoyed. Her father, the king, decides to use this new alliance to his advantage and goes to war; suddenly, our humble Weaver is asked to appear on the kingdom’s behalf. “‘O, Lord, what shall I do now?’ he asks himself. ‘I could simply get into my flying machine and fly away someplace; in that case I lose this pearl among women, my bride forever. And on top of it...[would] kill my father-in-law. Therefore I have to accept the challenge and do battle.’”<sup>28</sup>

The Weaver pretends to be Visnu in public, accepting the consequences of his own death. By a curious twist of fate, the god is so enamored by the chariot-maker’s display of courage that Visnu decides to help. “‘This weaver has the spark of divinity about him ... therefore part of me shall enter his mortal frame.’”<sup>29</sup> Unwittingly possessed by the god, the Weaver is a hero in battle. All the immortals come to watch his triumph, amazed at the spectacle of divine embodiment. “Even the Creator does not see through / a well-devised fraud.”<sup>30</sup> Curiously, the Weaver never understands what happened. In this instance, human interaction is momentarily commensurate with an immor-

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<sup>26</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 89.

tal hierarchy, an interaction that nevertheless eludes the humans it impacts. The story highlights radical and simultaneous temporal relations once more; the immortals inhabit a different time-space. The tick, the lion, the elephant, the plastic toothbrush, nuclear waste, and the human boast different life spans as well, thereby harboring unique sequential realities. While the gods themselves remain mysterious (and are largely missing from most of the *Panchatantra's* stories) they nonetheless inhabit (and therefore illustrate) a space outside mortal experience.

Wily, one of the narrators, is interesting both because he is an unemployed son of a minister (which colors his proclivity to seek and share life advice with his friend, Wary), but also because the names of these two jackal friends in Book One translate literally as Little Crow and Little Tamer. In her Foreword, translator Chandra Rajan writes, "It is a common belief that the crow is the most intelligent of birds, wise, shrewd, cautious, with good judgment; just the qualities we see in the first jackal, whom I have named Wary... Whether the second jackal, *Damanaka*, is a 'tamer' is highly doubtful; but Wily he certainly is; a mean and conniving rascal. And the name Wily seemed appropriate in contrast to Wary."<sup>31</sup> Her description encapsulates the act of translation, showing further how the jackal was additionally named after a crow, in much the same way that the creatures in one site of the *The Panchatantra* model their behavior upon creatures in another. Furthermore, there remains something remote about these narrators, even after they have been transcribed and translated. So "Wily," the name, is an imperfect solution but provides an adequate vehicle to filter understanding.

Curiously, *The Panchatantra* ends with a tale of a hunchback, a three-breasted princess, and a blind man. They are sent on a boat to live in exile. While the princess is married to the blind man, she has an affair with the hunchback. She and the hunchback then devise to poison her husband and make a soup with a black snake, telling him it is fish. The blind man goes to stir the pot; it smells good.

*As he kept stirring, the poisonous vapors rising from the pot got into his eyes. And imagine his surprise when the thick film that had covered his eyes began to melt and peel away gradually. Noticing this beneficial effect of the steam on his sight he opened his eyes*

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<sup>31</sup> Chandra Rajan, "Foreword," *The Panchatantra*, xiii.

*wide and did his best to let the steam impinge on them. Soon his vision cleared completely so that he could look into the pot. And what did he see at the bottom of the cooking pot but a chopped up black serpent.<sup>32</sup>*

Confused as to why his wife might try to kill him, the blind man does not reveal his newfound sight but watches the couple kiss in secret. Inflamed with rage, the blind man picks up his adversary and throws him against his spouse. "The force of the impact of the hunchback's body on her chest pushed [the princess'] third breast in, while her lover's hump dashing against her bosom, straightened out."<sup>33</sup> This unexpected turn of events underscores the influence of chance, while calling forth the fluidity of definition, embodiment, and worldview. Although they might be identified by their exceptional physical attributes in one instance (before exile), those same exceptions dissolve according to the circumstances of another (post-exile). Not only have the bodies of these figures changed, so has the relationship between them, and their relationship to society.

If an individual's world is defined by the conditions of their respective embodiment—consider again the tick's blindness and how that blindness forms and filters its *umwelt*—this final story of *The Panchatantra* illustrates the potential flexibility of *umwelts* while underscoring Viveiros de Castro's point, namely that the greater context in which these *umwelts* interact remains constant. Although the blind man experiences a radical transformation, he nevertheless recognizes a correlation between the world he encountered blindly and the world he encounters with sight. Similarly, although his relationship to his wife has shifted with her physique, she remains the same person. Perhaps in recognizing the bow and flex of *umwelts*, humanity might find a new orientation toward the world through which a collective future could be sustained.

By identifying with different individuals, Śarma suggests the advance of wisdom. Because this book is composed at a king's request, there is a deeper implication that the character of this wisdom leads to stability and prosperity for the whole kingdom; this assumes that proper diplomacy accounts for multiple subjects operating under different conditions with different desires. So

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<sup>32</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 434.

<sup>33</sup> Viṣṇu Śarma, *The Pañcātantra*, 434.

many ironic conclusions unfold from here. Acknowledging the limit to universal—and even moral—maxims is the only way to shepherd a greater stability; as though one must embrace the flexing universe in order to promote endurance. Furthermore, acknowledging the diverse lives and needs of others actually yields and maintains prosperity. This second irony links with the current ecological crisis, namely the west's awareness of other species—and the value of their environmental contributions—grows alongside an accompanying knowledge of species' disappearance.

"[There] is a growing awareness that the Earth System has entered a mass-extinction event, similar to the previous five documented great extinctions that have occurred on the planet."<sup>34</sup> According to the Center for Biological Diversity, thirty to fifty percent of all species are predicted to disappear by mid-century, ninety-nine percent of which would be attributed to human causes. "Although extinction is a natural phenomenon, it occurs at a natural 'background' rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we're now losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate, with literally dozens going extinct every day."<sup>35</sup> This ecological crisis is the direct consequence of consumerist strategies that, while sustaining one vision of human enterprise and entrepreneurship choke the shared environment with disastrous effects that are not simply limited to nonhuman kinds, but the whole earth system—including human society.

*In a landmark study published in 2015 researchers have established causal links between climate change and the following events: (a) historically unprecedented drought conditions in Syria beginning in 2007; (b) huge agricultural failure in the region; (c) the migration of some 1.5 million people from rural to urban areas in Syria; and (d) the civil unrest that festered on the peripheries of these urban areas as Assad ignored the emerging problems of crime, overcrowding, unemployment, and an increasingly violent struggle for dwindling resources. When people protested, Assad turned violently on them, deepening and spreading the chaos.*

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<sup>34</sup> Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, "Art and Death," in *Art in the Anthropocene*, eds. Davis and Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>35</sup> "The Extinction Crisis," *Center for Biodiversity*, at [http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements\\_of\\_biodiversity/extinction\\_crisis](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis).



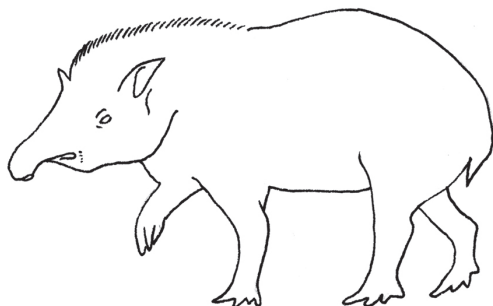
*The problem is, moreover, likely to get worse, and not just in Syria. The age of climate change is going to be the age of human displacement, though we can't be certain just how many people will be on the move. This demographic alteration should put enormous pressure on governments to behave in ways that do not exacerbate social conflict, and obviously not all of them will be able, or inclined to do so.<sup>36</sup>*

The paradigms guiding geopolitics are grossly inadequate—and *foolish*—failing to provide its constituents either a sustainable future or the possibility to conceive and implement alternative socioeconomic systems. “A March 2014 article in *The Guardian* predicted that industrialized civilization will collapse due to anthropogenic climate change within the next hundred years.”<sup>37</sup> It is all the more important to look at this ecological crisis as a coming of age moment wherein humanity's orientation to and participation with the environment shifts to address a multispecies and multi-material collectivity. What would such a politician look like? What might school our collective imagination, such that it could see the earth meeting our gaze?

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<sup>36</sup> Byron Williston, “Climate change and the Syrian refugee crisis: being honest about root causes,” *OUPblog*, October 15, 2015, at <https://blog.oup.com/2015/10/climate-change-and-the-syrian-refugee-crisis>. The “landmark study” to which Williston refers can be accessed at <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.abstract>.

<sup>37</sup> “Diplomacy in the Face of Gaia: Bruno Latour in Conversation with Heather Davis,” in *Art in the Anthropocene*, 43.



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**Caroline Picard** is a curator, publisher, writer, and artist. She is the Executive Director, Head Curator, and Founding Editor of The Green Lantern Press (GLP), a 501c3 nonprofit art producer established in 2005 that produces contemporary art exhibitions, critical art and poetry publications, and cultural events that intersect literature, philosophy, theory, and art.

Her critical writing appears under the name Caroline Picard in publications like *ArtForum* (critics picks), *art21*, *Flash Art International*, *Hyperallergic*, and *The Seen*. A recent chapbook with a critical essay about the cats of James Joyce, Marcel Broodthaers, Derrida, the Walker Art Center, and Art Orienté object, *The Strangers Among Us*, was released by Astrophil Press in 2017. She also publishes fiction and comics under the name Coco Picard, and her first graphic novel, *The Chronicles of Fortune*, was published by Radiator Press in 2017.

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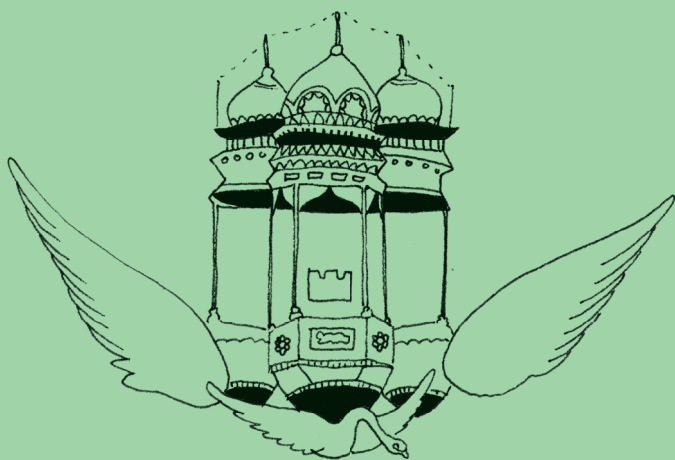


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