





FIGURE 1. W. D. Hammond, *The Fall of Icarus*, 1995, acrylic on canvas. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, purchased 1996. Courtesy of W. D. Hammond estate.

# The Whiteness of Birds

**NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF**

All we knew was the birds  
had  
been debating for ages, no consensus or  
conclusion had been reached.  
—Nathaniel Mackey, “Telling It to the Birds”

The weapon of theory is a conference of the birds.  
—Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *All Incomplete*

The just person does not argue for their rights.  
It is for others that they stand and fight.  
—Attar, *The Conference of Birds*

What is a bird? For the planter and colonist, it was often a pest, eating seed or fruit. For the poor and enslaved, it was a significant source of food, made into a commodity by mass killing. In settler colonial practice, the bird was rendered into a viewpoint, the bird’s-eye view that has now become fully automated and digitized. White seeing takes place from the bird’s-eye view, conceptually and physically, whether in racial hierarchy or from a balloon, plane, helicopter, or drone. Such “racializing surveillance,” to use Simone Browne’s term,<sup>1</sup> is now the predicate to any possible racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> For those whom racializing surveillance would contain and segregate, the bird was a visible example of freedom. Bird-watching, by contrast, is a metonymy of settler colonialism. The settler sees the bird, kills it, classifies it, and has it stuffed. Alive, the bird embodies freedom. Dead, first it was an extractive commodity; later, when displayed as an attraction in museums

of natural history, it contained and expressed “higher” values of aesthetics. There are over 750 natural history museums in the United States, not to mention 2,400 zoos. Rendered into a commonplace extractive item of exchange, birds index the intersection of extinction, settler colonialism, and racializing capitalism. The removal of birds from colonized land clears the air and makes it open for militarized surveillance. In Palestine, the Israeli Defense Force continues to de-bird the occupied territories. For when the ground is claimed by settlers as nothing, terra nullius, requiring in response what Sarah Elizabeth Lewis calls “groundwork,”<sup>3</sup> the air still remains. Christina Sharpe evokes the “air of freedom,” no metaphor to those incarcerated, and the possibility of aspiration.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of the pandemic of a respiratory disease and one year in the wake of George Floyd, on the same day as the Central Park bird-watching incident, these questions are, again, in the air.

### Extraction

One of the foundational mythologies of settler colonialism has been white people’s claim to dominion over all the flora and fauna of the planet as an inexhaustible resource. Moving beyond even the divine dominion given to Adam in Genesis, John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* claimed: “Subduing or cultivating the earth and having dominion, we see are joined together.”<sup>5</sup> Land could be taken, according to Locke, if it was not being cultivated—that is, if it was seen as terra nullius (nothing land), the Roman legal doctrine. Such cultivation of terra nullius

## ALIVE, THE BIRD EMBODIES FREEDOM. DEAD, IT WAS FIRST AN EXTRACTIVE COMMODITY AND LATER IT CONTAINED AND EXPRESSED “HIGHER” VALUES OF AESTHETICS

gave dominion over land and life alike. Empire was coextensive with white nature—all subdued earth was both empire and white nature. Macarena Gómez-Barris succinctly summarizes: “European colonization throughout the world cast nature as the other and, through the gaze of terra nullius, represented Indigenous peoples as non-existent.”<sup>6</sup> Gómez-Barris here insightfully considers terra nullius as a gaze. Someone arrives, looks at land, fails to see who and what is already there, and claims it for themselves. There will be maps, plats, titles, and the other apparatus of bureaucratic colonizing. The result is what she calls “the extractive zone.” The extractions are not just minerals, ores, and other raw materials; they are also birds, bison, fossils, archaeological traces, human remains, photographs, and moving images. That extraction is then turned into value, whether financial or cultural.

After the Haitian Revolution (1791–1801), with the terra nullius having risen up and created its own

gaze, European natural history added extinction to extraction as a way of (un)seeing, as Ursula Heise and others have shown.<sup>7</sup> Formerly considered heretical or impossible, extinction—also known as catastrophe or revolution—transformed natural history into life science (biology) in the era of the revolutions of the enslaved and abolition. Based on observation and display, the gaze of extinction, to adapt Gómez-Barris, served as evidence for white superiority by means of purportedly superior capacity for visual observation. Audubon claimed his art depicted “*nature as it existed*.”<sup>8</sup> What geologist, comparative zoologist, and racial theorist Louis Agassiz termed “the naturalist’s gaze” included extinction as a past or present possibility. Twinned natural history and anthropological museums were formed in order to collect species and specimens, whether human or other-than-human, before they became extinct. Under the gaze of extinction, those colonized should also be collected. Collection became the third leg of colonial administration, added to the long-standing imperatives of ordering and governing set by Barbados’s slave law in 1660.<sup>9</sup> After Haiti, and in the museum, the very idea of “nature” was and is inextricably entangled with race. There are thirty-six thousand African objects in the American Museum of Natural History. In 2021, the Smithsonian Institution revealed that it holds thirty thousand “items” of human remains, while Harvard University has a further twenty thousand. Nearly all were taken from Indigenous peoples, with a sliver devoted to the enslaved.

All were said to be required for the gaze of extinction to consider.

In this frame of colonizing and extinction, the ecocide of bird populations is both persistent and pervasive. Birds were slaughtered in totally disproportionate numbers to any need or market. Long offered as commodities in the settler economy, sold for pennies in local markets, birds finally acquired some commercial and noncommercial value by virtue of scarcity on the verge of extinction. But the immense labor of causing extinction was itself a form of extraction. It eliminated a certain possibility of freedom and turned it into a commodity. The ornithologist Audubon recorded that the price of a passenger pigeon in New York went up from a penny in 1805 to four cents in 1830.<sup>10</sup> That’s a basic extractive commodity in a period where a laborer made about a dollar a day and farmed poultry was around twelve cents a pound. But, mused Audubon, their numbers did not seem to decrease. By that logic, slaughtering appeared to generate not scarcity but a modest rise in value. It made a certain kind of financial sense to kill everything in sight. But creating endangered species, human and other-than-human, was a more important component of the psychological wages of whiteness. Exterminating birds offered a particular form of violent pleasure by confirming and making visible the capacity of colonization.

### **May 25, 2020**

May 25, 2020, the day on which George Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, began

with what became known as the Central Park bird-watching incident. It demonstrated that it is still inconceivable for a white woman with a University of Chicago master's degree and a career in finance to conceptualize bird-watching while Black. As types, blackness and birds, in the worldview personified by the dog walker Amy Cooper, are the objects of white taxonomy, not its performing subjects. New York City Audubon Society board member Christian Cooper asked her to leash her dog, as required to protect the wildlife. Instead she saw him not as a person but as a type, "African American," as if she was observing wildlife. Her racialized seeing transformed his spoken request into a violent assault. This form of looking was known under Jim Crow as "reckless eyeballing," meaning to look a whiter person in the eye, especially as a form of (alleged) sexual desire. Unable to envisage that a Black man might instead be looking at birds, Amy Cooper called the NYPD. By the time they arrived, Christian Cooper had left, but he released the cell-phone video he made of the incident. Amy Cooper's racialized seeing in Central Park was not an exception: it was constitutive of her role in finance capital. She worked for a trifecta of 2008 financial crash companies: Lehman Brothers, AIG Insurance, and Citigroup. While many others were ruined, Cooper did just fine, ending up as a head of insurance portfolio management at Franklin Templeton, a hedge fund managing \$1.5 trillion in assets. Its webpage devoted to diversity—"top to bottom"—then showed a white woman like Cooper. Police in Minneapolis would

## UNDER THE GAZE OF EXTINCTION, THOSE COLONIZED SHOULD ALSO BE COLLECTED

view George Floyd in related racializing terms. It was only seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier's cell-phone video that prevented Floyd from becoming just another statistic. When the prosecutor invited the jury to "believe what you saw," it marked one of the very few occasions when such evidence was indeed taken at face value. By the same token, as much as it might be comforting to think of Amy Cooper as an exception, she was more exactly an example of the white way of seeing that renders life into types within a racializing hierarchy. And financializes the result. Astonishingly, exactly one year later, Cooper sued investment firm Franklin Templeton, her former employers, for wrongful dismissal on the grounds of racial discrimination. Cooper claims to have been fired *because* she is a white woman, exemplifying the resurgence of white fragility as a claim to white supremacy.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the Audubon Society had warned in 2019 of "a net loss approaching 3 billion birds, or 29% of 1970 abundance"—following from decades of such reports, stretching back to the nineteenth century. What birds there are to see now are a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of what there used to be. After 125

## THE IMMENSE LABOR OF CAUSING EXTINCTION WAS ITSELF A FORM OF EXTRACTION

years of warnings, the de-birding of the settler colony is close to complete. The remaining sliver of avian life is sustained by human feeding, reserves, zoos, and the like as an attraction, as entertainment, and as a hobby. This is not an accident. The active extermination of Indigeneity was the product of the same elements that comprised the Central Park incident: extraction, whiteness, other-than-white life, and natural history. The result is not the expected white paradise but what the scientists call “an ecosystem collapse.”<sup>12</sup>

### Fugitivity

In the United States, there has been a particular relation between Atlantic slavery and birds that can only be outlined here. If, for the colonist, birds were an index of whiteness as property within terra nullius, they were for the enslaved the sight of what Walter Johnson calls “freedom as a bodily practice.” The enslaved dreamed of flight, and envied the birds their movement, while slaveowners feared that birds might convey ideas and practices of resistance.<sup>13</sup> Even bird-watching and ornithology in the United States cannot be separated from slavery. The Saint-Domingue born slave-owner turned naturalist Jean-Jacques Audu-

bon produced his legendary *Birds of America* as a taxonomy of terra nullius (or perhaps *aer nullius*, the nothing air). His name now authorizes the Audubon Society, for whom Christian Cooper serves as a board member in New York. In turn, as a refugee from one plantation economy turned settler in another, Audubon often had to decide who he was, indicated by his long list of names: John James Audubon, Jean-Jacques Rabin, Jean-Jacques La Forêt, and John James La Forest.<sup>14</sup> Born in Saint-Domingue to a plantation owner and enslaver father and a Jewish servant mother, Jeanne Rabin, he became a refugee in France from postindependence Haiti. Finding his way to the United States as an adult, Audubon was haunted by abolition, the extinction of birds, and of the Indigenous population—whom he saw as doomed—and indeed of the American wilderness as such.<sup>15</sup>

Audubon turned to writing about birds after his debt-funded purchase of enslaved people to work at his Kentucky mill ended in bankruptcy in 1819. In his 1826 Mississippi River journal, written in his idiosyncratic Franglais, Audubon discovered a new means of accumulation through ornithology: “So Strong is my Anthusiast to Enlarge the Ornithological Knowledge of My Country that I felt as if I wish myself *Rich again*.”<sup>16</sup> His last human property rowed him down the Mississippi to New Orleans, where he sold the two men. His famous drawings of birds were less original than many assume. Their large format and “action” poses were standard at the time in French (if not North American) ornithology.<sup>17</sup> His scenes were not drawn from life in the wild but made in his studio,

using dead birds suspended by wires. He worked in a variety of media but not oil paint. One of his most influential drawings was that of what he called the wild pigeon, now usually known as the passenger pigeon, because it became extinct in August 1914. Audubon's drawing stands in for the absent birds. The unreal sharpness of line; the sense that the body was assembled in geometric sections, which is to say, the body as a machine; and the hyperreal clarity of the colonized white space used as the ground combine to give a paradoxical sense of both precision and abstraction (fig. 2). In a word: whiteness.

Audubon's doubled settler status enabled his seeing of birds as colonial accumulation and as part of the property interest of whiteness.<sup>18</sup> He authorized this technique as derived from the studio—a combination of art school and picture workshop—of the great neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David.<sup>19</sup> While Audubon did have artistic training in France, there is no record of his having been part of David's extensive studio. David's style certainly centered on the depiction of line to create form, just as Audubon's work did. In painting of the period, to use "line" to structure the image, rather than "color," was to define your work as History, meaning its most serious and morally important category. What History was Audubon depicting? It was the acceleration of the de-birding and de-wilding of America as an index of the formation of the settler colonial United States after the Louisiana Purchase. His originality was to express the resulting tensions between race, colonization, and extinction in a nonhuman but evocative form of History, which is to say, birds.



FIGURE 2. John James Audubon, *Passenger Pigeon* (1828–35). University of Pittsburgh via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.



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Fugitivity was a repeated figure in Audubon's work. In his *Ornithological Biography*, published as a textual accompaniment to the famous pictures, Audubon claimed to have encountered a maroon<sup>20</sup> (whom he called a runaway slave) in the Louisiana bayou, living in a canebrake with his family.<sup>21</sup> Here was yet another *homme de la forêt*, or as Audubon put it, mixing racialized metaphors: "a perfect Indian in his knowledge of the woods." Developing his story, Audubon tells how this man had been resold following the bankruptcy of his first owner, separating his family. He memorized the destination of his wife and children, and after he himself had escaped, rescued them, and, with the cooperation of those still enslaved, made camp in the woods. The bankruptcy and family breakup again echo Audubon's personal, rather than ornithological, biography. He devised a fantasy ending in which the maroons obeyed him because of their "long habit of submission" and returned with him to their original plantation, where Audubon persuaded the new owner to take them all into his ownership. He ends his little reverie with the inaccurate statement that since this time it has "become illegal to separate slave families without their consent." The pursuit and biography of birds led Audubon to imagine personal and political reconciliation within racial hierarchy and restored slavery, as if the Haitian Revolution had never happened. For him, the restoration of benevolent slavery was a happy ending. There was no illustration for "The Runaway."

By 1851 a white doctor, Samuel Cartwright,

claimed to identify “drapetomania,” or the “mental alienation” of running away among the enslaved. Reporting in the year of the Fugitive Slave Act to the Medical Association of Louisiana “on the diseases and physical peculiarities of the Negro race,” Cartwright claimed to be a pioneer of “observation,” the Audubon of enslaved human beings.<sup>22</sup> For Cartwright the evidence for African incapacity was the absence of any progress in arts and sciences, including monuments. Inevitably, he added that if left alone they “would relapse into barbarism, or into slavery, as they have done in Hayti.”<sup>23</sup> Based on these observations, Cartwright named and categorized drapetomania. Cartwright further diagnosed a wide-ranging “Dysaesthesia Aethiopica” (Black dysaesthesia), a “hebetude,” or laziness, of mind and body, especially prevalent among “free negroes.” Dysaesthesia was the opposite of the properly aesthetic conquest of nature, which he might have called euaesthesia (good aesthetic). Freedom was dysaesthetic, an alienation. Dysaesthesia caused the enslaved to “break, waste and destroy everything they handle. . . . They wander about at night. . . . They slight their work. . . . They raise disturbances with their overseer.” All of these actions were obviously modes of refusal and resistance. Noting how the enslaved destroyed the plants they were supposed to cultivate, broke their tools, tore their clothes, took things, and refused to respond to punishment, Cartwright inadvertently described the general strike against slavery in the making. Cartwright instead diagnosed them to be

symptoms of lung disease, caused by “blood not sufficiently vitalized being distributed to the brain.” Similar beliefs have found their way into present-day police reports to account for the death of Black suspects by chokehold. For Cartwright, it was only slavery that beneficially produced the necessary “exercise” to “decarbonize their blood.”<sup>24</sup>

### “Necrography”

Audubon drew birds in the frame of a naturalized plantation economy, a “good aesthetic.”<sup>25</sup> In 1831 Audubon observed what he called the snowy heron, also known as the white egret, near Charleston in South Carolina. In the background, Audubon’s assistants had painted a plantation called Rice Hope, where the enslaved cultivated rice. None are to be seen here. Instead, Audubon, masked as bird hunters tend to be, is seen with his rifle, chasing fugitives, whether birds or people. The print represented supremacy as the intersection of whiteness, settler colonialism, the Second Amendment, and the invisibility of enslaved African labor. You can buy originals and reproductions of it all over the internet, teaching racialized vision, one print at a time. Audubon casually recorded how practices of enslavement affected even common songbirds. For instance, the blue jay was a prolific species with a habit of eating crops, so that in Louisiana “the planters are in the habit of occasionally soaking some corn in a solution of arsenic, and scattering the seeds over the ground, in consequence of which many Jays are found dead about



FIGURE 3. John James Audubon, *Snowy Heron* (1828–35). University of Pittsburgh via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

the fields and gardens.”<sup>26</sup> He did not need to mention that in Louisiana all planters used enslaved labor (fig. 3).

Audubon’s writing was no pastoral. Rather, it was an account of how much killing is involved in making a settler colony. And making pictures from the results. A single blast from a shotgun killed 120 blue-winged teals, a duck, in New Orleans.<sup>27</sup> Audubon saw one man in Pennsylvania kill 6,000 passenger pigeons in a single day. While the passenger pigeon has become a somewhat notorious example, almost every bird Audubon looked at comes with a story of mass slaughter. Take the golden plover. While in Louisiana, Audubon noted: “The gunners had assembled in parties of from twenty to fifty at different places, where they knew from experience that the Plovers would pass.” He estimated that 144,000 were killed. As a result, “the next morning the markets were amply supplied with Plovers” at a very low price.<sup>28</sup> Canier hunters would have brought fewer birds and made more. But by removing birds from the wild, hunters deprived both the enslaved and Indigenous of a food resource and forced the settler poor to buy them rather than hunt them.<sup>29</sup> For bird hunters, killing was part of the emotional wages of whiteness, where to be “master” as Audubon had been in the bayou, whether over nature or the enslaved, was itself the reward. This is exactly what a certain kind of white person still says: give me liberty or give me death, where liberty is defined by access to guns.

By the late nineteenth century, these massacres had gone so far that new colonial institutions were

created to preserve remnants as specimens and to display the past in museums. The real problem with the American Museum of Natural History is not its displays—as awful as they are—but the fact that it had to be created at all. The institutionalization of “nature” through museums, zoos, wildlife refuges, national parks, and the definition of wilderness marked the peak of empire’s exterminations. By consigning the other-than-human world to this status as an attraction to be looked at, empire claimed full dominion over life. The dead animals displayed in the dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History teach children both that the role of nonhuman life is to die and that they are to be its killers. Its opening in 1877 was the corollary to the creation of anthropological museums in Europe, formed from the loot taken by colonial expeditions. Just as Dan Hicks sees the anthropological museum as an “implement of . . . imperialism made in the final third of the 19th century,”<sup>30</sup> so too were museums of natural history, game reserves, and national parks tools of enshrining settler colonial dominion over all nature and making it permanent. This maneuver further closed the distinction between enclosed/colonized space and environment/uncolonized space, with the dangerous exception of the so-called reservation. As one part of this far-reaching process, ornithology was separated from natural history and institutionalized with the formation of the American Ornithological Union in 1883.<sup>31</sup> Its function was to assert the primacy of other-than-exchange value for birds and, by extension, the natural world as a whole.

## Eugenic Diorama

In 1886 a special supplement of the new magazine *Science* was devoted to the decline of bird species.<sup>32</sup> American Museum of Natural History curator J. A. Allen exhorted his readers that despite their still-limited financial value, “birds may be said to have a practical value of high importance and an aesthetic value not easily overestimated.” He blamed five groups for their decline: market gunners, who hunted game birds; African Americans who trapped and sold small birds across the South for food; women, who wore hats with feathers, named as “the dead bird wearing gender”; immigrants who trapped birds for food; and even small boys who hunted for eggs. From this optic, the survival of birds was a blueprint for the eugenic survival of white supremacy in the uncertain conditions of modernity, which meant “reconfiguring the terms of being natural in culture.”<sup>33</sup> The eugenic program developed by Francis Galton and enthusiastically received in the United States offered solutions to all the issues highlighted by Allen.<sup>34</sup> White women were to give up their monstrous display of feathers and return to breeding the “great race.” Immigration was to cease, as the 1882 Asian Exclusion Act prefigured, followed by ever more restrictive legislation. Jim Crow would reassert control of the South, and public schools would discipline children. The United States found many other ways for men to satisfy their desire to shoot. But none of these eugenic policies much helped the birds. Americans continued to eat all kinds of bird in the period, including meadowlarks,

## AUDUBON'S DRAWING STANDS IN FOR THE ABSENT BIRDS

blackbirds, sparrows, thrushes, warblers, vireos, wax-wings, reed-birds, robins, and flickers. In 1897 William Hornaday of the New York Zoological Society concluded from two hundred questionnaires sent around the country that nearly half of all American birds had perished since 1882. As late as 1940 Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a column asking women to cut back on wearing feathers.

The display of animals in habitat groups within dioramas in natural history museums came to the United States in 1887 with the display of eighteen groups of nesting birds with accessories like foliage and flowers, created by the British museum modeler Mrs. E. S. Mogridge (d. 1903), who had worked for the British Museum and its Museum of Natural History with her brother H. Mintorn.<sup>35</sup> While using just a fraction of the American Museum of Natural History's forty thousand birds, Mogridge's models changed its practice dramatically. She was credited by museum director Henry Fairfield Osborn for inspiring its famous habitat displays.<sup>36</sup> Beginning in 1902 the president of the American Ornithologists Union, Frank Chapman, created a group of bird dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>37</sup> In Allen's con-

temporary description: "The area of these groups ranges from 60 to 160 square feet, to which is added a panoramic background, which in most cases merges insensibly into the group itself. The backgrounds are painted by skillful artists, generally from studies made at the actual site represented."<sup>38</sup> The panorama depicting wading birds was based on Cuthbert Rookery in Florida, where a game warden had been killed by feather poachers in 1905 and the birds were believed to be at risk of local extinction. Chapman conceived of the panoramas as three-dimensional perspective paintings, noting "the background is curved [convex backward] with the front opening so reduced in size that at the proper distance, or 'correct view-point,' neither the ends nor the top of the group can be seen. By thus leaving the actual limits of the group to the imagination the illusion of space and distance is greatly heightened."<sup>39</sup> The ideal spectator would then stand at the proper viewpoint and be taken in by the illusion, to get a bird's-eye view of the birds (fig. 4).

### The Assembly of Birds

In a 2021 interview, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney stress how a key phrase to understand *All Incomplete* is the "conference of birds" and the murmurations that result. The word *murmuration* describes a flock of birds moving together to create fractal patterns in the sky. These moments are mesmerizing. Go and look at one of these videos.<sup>40</sup> Afterward, imagine a murmuration with millions of birds in it, the flocks of birds that were commonplace before settler colonists systematically killed them all. Audubon described the "angles,



FIGURE 4.  
Wading Bird  
diorama at  
the American  
Museum  
of Natural  
History, 1909.  
Photograph  
by author.

curves and undulations” in the “multitudes of Wild Pigeons” as tactics designed to repel hawks.<sup>41</sup> He estimated that there were no less than a billion birds in the murmuration. Now you have a sense of what the de-birding of North America has wrought. In his account of slavery, Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the architects of Central Park, often used the term *murmur* to mean conspire or revolt.<sup>42</sup> A murmuration in that sense is the revolution. Perhaps the conference of birds is the past future that awaits.

In seventeenth-century Europe, the “assembly of birds” was a popular artistic theme, often treated by

the Dutch artist Frans Snyders. The parrot and toucan in one version make it clear that it was always a colonial imaginary. The owl at the center is either directing the song or warning the birds of the human hunters following Aesop’s fable. Or both. I like to think of it as an actual assembly, a democracy in which predators and songbirds have an equal say. Unlike humans, except in opera, there’s no need for them to speak one at a time. Their chorus forms what settlers had heard as the “wild jubilee,” a celebration of the end of slavery in nature. There’s a *Concert of Birds* (ca. 1630) by Snyders in the Prado without the owl, which is to say,



FIGURE 5. Frans Snyder, *Concert of Birds* (1630), Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

an assembly without a visible leader, a direct democracy of other than human life (fig. 5). Some suggest that the owl was cut out at some point, but no matter. Someone wanted it to look like that.

Such assemblies have existed and do exist. In the remarkable paintings of Aotearoa, New Zealand, artist Bill Hammond, who sadly passed in February 2021, zoomorphic birds dominate the land (fig. 1). Hammond's work radically changed when he took a visit to Motu Maha, or the Auckland Islands, an archipelago to the south of Aotearoa that is designated as an "area outside territorial authority." Early Polynesian settlement gave way to a whaling and sealing station until the immense massacre of the seals made the labor of extermination unprofitable around 1894. The islands are now a national nature reserve, and the authorities are attempting to remove all introduced mammals, like feral cats, rabbits, and pigs.

This effort is what Juno Salazar Parreñas calls "decolonizing extinction. Care is not necessarily affection, but for me it is a concern about the treatment and welfare of others."<sup>43</sup> It might mean rehabilitating animals to the wild, as Parreñas describes in the case of orangutans born in captivity and raised "semi-wild." Or it might mean rehabilitating the wild to animals, as is taking place in Motu Maha. On his visit, Hammond was struck by the way the birds on the island stood upright staring out to sea, and it reminded him that prior to the arrival of humans around 1300 CE, birds were the dominant species in the islands now known as Aotearoa. There were no predators, other than the pouakai (Haast's eagle), a giant eagle. The most populous species was the large bipedal flightless birds called moa, which were quickly made extinct by the first human colonists, now known as the Māori. They simply ate them all, in about two hundred

years. Archeologists have identified three hundred moa-hunting sites in Aotearoa. Remains suggest that twenty thousand to ninety thousand birds were eaten at the Waitaki River bone midden alone.<sup>44</sup>

By 1873 the naturalist William Buller articulated the ornithologist's task in settler colonialism:

Under the changed physical conditions of the country, brought about by the operations of colonization, some of these remarkable forms have already become almost, if not quite, extinct, and others are fast expiring. It has been the author's desire to collect and place on record a complete history of these birds before their final extirpation shall have rendered such a task impossible; and it will be his aim to produce a book at once acceptable to scientific men in general and useful to his fellow colonists.<sup>45</sup>

The conditions were different indeed. The Maoris, he noted, said of the kākāpō, or owl parrot (*Stringops habroptilus*), "In winter they assemble in large numbers, as if for business; for after confabulating together for some time with great uproar, they march off in bands in different directions."<sup>46</sup> Buller recognized the sound of this freedom in the dawn chorus, comprising bell-birds, tui, whiteheads, and piopio: "Shortly after daylight a number of birds of various kinds join their voices in a wild jubilee of song."<sup>47</sup> Such natural democracy was, he believed, certain to become extinct as the deliberate result of the operations of colonization. Indeed, some thirty-five species that he might have heard have since become extinct.

## CARTWRIGHT INADVERTENTLY DESCRIBED THE GENERAL STRIKE AGAINST SLAVERY IN THE MAKING

Nonetheless, Māori proverbs recorded the speech of the assembled birds:

E koekoe te tūi, e ketekete te kākā, e kūkū te kereru

The tui chatters, the parrot gabbles, the wood pigeon coos.

The speech of the birds enters human language here, their sounds forming words, just as murmuring melds into thinking. When the Europeans came and began doing what colonizers do, a new saying arose among those who, for the first time were now Māori (ordinary), as opposed to members of specific iwi (peoples):

Ka ngaro ā-moa te iwi nei

The people will disappear like the moa.<sup>48</sup>

The Māori may have been the cause of the moa's disappearance, but this saying suggests that they regretted it.

Musing on all this, after reading Buller, Hammond



## A MURMURATION IN THAT SENSE IS THE REVOLUTION. PERHAPS THE CONFERENCE OF BIRDS IS THE PAST FUTURE THAT AWAITS.

created a massive *Fall of Icarus* (1995) (fig. 1), in which the birds watch the human flight of Icarus end in failure. The space is a deep metallic blue, mingled with drips of black and white paint throughout. One of those drips, perhaps the white streaky column in the center-right, marks Icarus falling from his overambitious flight. Icarus would have been the first (white) colonist in Aotearoa had he been able to land. It might have been a hard place to fly, because there are two distinct horizons, marked by smoking volcanic islands. The birds stand in trees to the left and right from top to bottom, but the space nonetheless “works,” visually. The land is new, there are not yet human words to describe it, but the birds sing it into being. What are these two spaces? Colonial and Indigenous? Human and avian? Or a double vision of space, not yet colonized as space, not subject to the “laws” of perspective? Can you fly drones here? The birds look out from the trees, bipedal, wingéd, armed in the sense that they have arms, long-beaked, wearing one-piece costumes like superheroes. The stillness of their looking watches over this doubled space to live and keeps it possible, where humans would in-

sist otherwise. Some stand on branches, others hang by their “arms.” What are the birds actively doing? They create community, they strike against colonialism and the invasion of humans, and they imagine the future. They are waiting, not for Godot, but for the end of whiteness. ■

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### Notes

- 1 Browne, *Dark Matters*, 15.
- 2 Robinson, *Black Marxism*.
- 3 Lewis, “Groundwork.”

- 4 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 104–12; Fleetwood, *Marking Time*, 34–35, 52–53.
- 5 Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 5, section 35.
- 6 Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*, 6.
- 7 See Heise, *Imagining Extinction*; and Grusin, introduction to *After Extinction*, vii–xx.
- 8 Audubon, *Writings*, 754.
- 9 Bennett et al., *Collecting, Ordering, Governing*, 9–51.
- 10 Audubon, *Writings*, 267.
- 11 Bromwich and Shanahan, “Amy Cooper.”
- 12 Axelson, “Nearly 30% of Birds.”
- 13 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 209–10; quotation, 210.
- 14 Rhodes, *John James Audubon*, 4–5.
- 15 Audubon, *Writings*, 522.
- 16 Audubon, *Writings*, 47.
- 17 Partridge, “By the Book.”
- 18 Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”
- 19 Audubon, *Prospectus: Birds of America*, 8.
- 20 Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 87.
- 21 Audubon, “Runaway,” 27–32.
- 22 Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases,” 691.
- 23 Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases,” 694
- 24 Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases,” 711–13.
- 25 I borrow the term *necrography* from Hicks, *British Museums*, 25–37.
- 26 Audubon, *Writings*, 291.
- 27 Audubon, *Writings*, 476.
- 28 Audubon, *Writings*, 87–88.
- 29 For example, Audubon described how Africans in Louisiana would make “gombo soup” from brown pelicans, of which “they kill all they can find” (*Writings*, 455).
- 30 Hicks, *British Museums*, 9.
- 31 See Taylor, “Blaming Women, Immigrants, and Minorities.”
- 32 Allen, “Present Wholesale Destruction.”
- 33 Gephart and Ross, “How to Wear the Feather,” 200.
- 34 See Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*.
- 35 “Notes and News,” 326–30. Her first names are not reported.
- 36 Osborn, *Creative Education*, 235.
- 37 Rogers, “Representing Nature,” 10–11.
- 38 Allen, “Habitat Groups,” 166.
- 39 Quoted in Allen, “Habitat Groups,” 174.
- 40 Valk, “Starling Murmuration.”
- 41 Audubon, *Writings*, 263, 262.
- 42 Olmsted, *Journey*, 191–94.
- 43 Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction*, 6.
- 44 Wolfe, *Moa*, 181.
- 45 Buller, *Birds of New Zealand*, 2.
- 46 Buller, *Birds of New Zealand*, 34.
- 47 Buller, *Birds of New Zealand*, 136.
- 48 Quoted and translated by Wehi, Whaanga, and Cox, “Dead as the Moa.”

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