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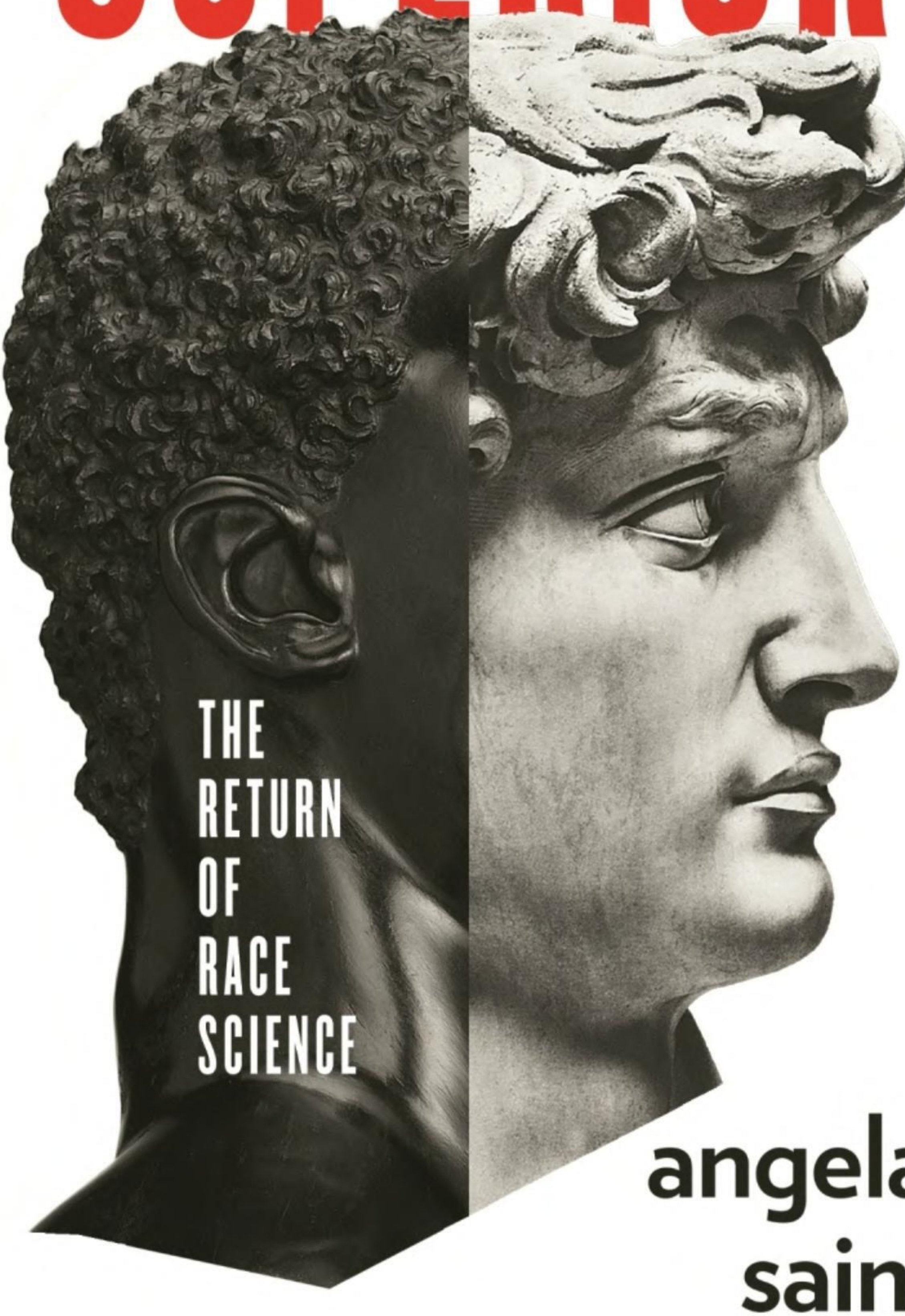

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SUPERIOR

The Return of Race Science

Angela Saini

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PROLOGUE

In the British Museum is where you can see 'em
The bones of African human beings

—*English Breakfast* by Fun-Da-Mental

I'm surrounded by dead people, asking myself what I am.

Where I am is the British Museum. I've lived in London almost all my life, and through the decades I've seen every gallery many times over. It was the place my husband took me on our first date, and years later, it was the first museum to which I brought my baby son. What draws me back here is the scale, the sheer quantity of artifacts, each seemingly older and more valuable than the last. I feel overwhelmed by the grandeur of it. But as I've learned, if you look carefully, there are secrets.

When you arrive for the first time, it's almost impossible to notice them, the finer detail obscured by the visitors in a rush to tick off every major treasure. You get swept away, a fish in a shoal. The museum doesn't focus on one object, or even a few. The point is all of it. So many valuable things brought together like this have an obvious story to tell, one skillfully constructed to remind us of Britain's place in the world.

Medical doctor and collector Sir Hans Sloane bequeathed the founding collection that became the British Museum in 1753. It would come to document the entire span of human culture, in time and in space. The British Empire was growing, and in the museum you can see how the empire builders envisioned their position in history. Britain framed itself as the heir to the great civilizations of Egypt, Greece, the Middle East, and Rome. Just look at the enormous colonnade at the entrance, completed in 1852, mimicking ancient Greek architecture. The neoclassical style we associate with

this corner of central London owes itself to the belief that the British saw themselves as the cultural and intellectual continuation of the great Greeks and Romans. The same brand of architecture on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, tells us that America's nation builders saw themselves this way, too.

Britain, this small island nation, once had the might to take all these treasures, these eight million precious objects from every corner of the globe, and transport them here. The inhabitants of Rapa Nui built the giant bust of Hoa Hakananai'a to capture the spirit of one of their ancestors, and the Aztecs carved the exquisite turquoise double-headed serpent as an emblem of authority, but these masterpieces are in this museum now. No one thing is more important than the museum itself. It is a testament to the audacity of power and wealth.

The history of the world as seen through British eyes was a simple one: a straight line from nearby cultures in North Africa and the Middle East to southern and western Europe. Walk past the white marble sculptures removed from the Parthenon in Athens even as they crumbled. Walk past the statues of Greek and Roman gods, their bodies considered the ideal of human physical perfection, and you're witness to this narrative. In 1798, when Napoleon conquered Egypt and a French army engineer uncovered the Rosetta Stone, allowing historians to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs for the first time, this priceless object was claimed for France. It remains one of the most important historical objects in the world, a jewel of antiquity. A few years after it was found, though, the British army captured it and brought it here, where it has remained ever since. You'll see that one side of the stone is still inscribed with the words "Captured in Egypt by the British Army." As historian Holger Hoock writes, "The scale and quantity of the British Museum's collections owe much to the power and reach of the British military and imperial state." Know its history, and you begin to see the museum as a testament to the struggle for domination, to possess the deep roots of civilization itself.

Not long after Sloane bequeathed his collection, white European scientists also began to define what we now think of as race. In 1795, in the third edition of *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, a German doctor, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, described five human varieties: Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays. To be precise, "Caucasian" refers to people who live in the mountainous Caucasus region between the Black Sea to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east, but under Blumenbach's sweeping definition it encompassed everyone from Europe to India and

North Africa. His arbitrary classification would have lasting consequences. We now use "Caucasian" as the polite way to describe white people.

But what does this mean today? Take the case of Mostafa Hefny, who considers himself very firmly and very obviously black. Authorities in the United States insist that he is white. He points to his skin, which is darker than that of some self-identified black Americans. He points to his hair, which is black and curlier than that of some black Americans. To any everyday observer, he's a black man. But according to the rules laid out by the US government in its 1997 Office of Management and Budget standards on race and ethnicity, people who originate in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa are automatically classified as white. Since Hefny arrived from Egypt, he is officially white. In 1997, aged forty-six, Hefny filed a lawsuit against the United States government to change his official racial classification from white to black. His predicament still hasn't been resolved.

Now you might think of Hefny as being in a unique pickle, but in one way or another, most of us fall through a crack when it comes to defining race. What we are, this hard measure of identity, something so deep that it's woven into our skin and hair, a quality that nobody can really change, is actually harder to pin down than we think. My parents are from India, which means I am often described as Indian, Asian, or simply "brown." When I grew up in southeast London in the 1990s, those of us who weren't white would often be categorized politically as black. The National Union of Journalists still considers me a "Black member." But by Blumenbach's definition, being ancestrally north Indian makes me Caucasian.

Like Mustafa Hefny, then, I too am black, white, and other colors, depending on your definition. My race, which might seem so obvious to one person, may be quite another thing to the next. And this is because, centuries ago, people placed boundaries around populations and territory as casually as moving pieces on a chess board. The boundaries could have been placed anywhere, but now we squirm to fit into them or jostle our way out of them.

Ultimately what matters isn't necessarily where the lines are drawn, but what they mean. What does it *mean* to be black or white or something else, and why does it matter to us?

At the time these labels were devised, the meaning was clear. The power hierarchy had white people of European descent sitting at the top. They believed themselves to be the natural winners, the inevitable heirs of great ancient civilizations. There are still many today who look at the world and imagine that the imbalances and inequalities we see are natural, that white

Europeans have some innate superiority that allowed them to conquer and take the lead, and that they will have it forever. They imagine that only Europe could have been the birthplace of modern science, or that only the Europeans could have conquered the Americas. They imagine, as French president Nicolas Sarkozy said in 2007, that "the tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. . . . There is neither room for human endeavour nor the idea of progress." Or, as President Trump reportedly said in a White House meeting with lawmakers in 2018, that Haiti, El Salvador, and parts of Africa are "shithole countries."

The subtext is that history is over, the fittest have survived, and the victors have been decided. But of course, history is never over, and it is always more complicated than we think. In Sir Hans Sloane's time, accounts of the past were scribbled hastily, without the benefit of knowing about the remarkable Indus Valley civilization more than five thousand years old. We still know relatively little about this civilization, except that it had sophisticated cities and conducted trade using precise weights and measures. Sloane could have known little of the more recent Aztec and Inca empires in South America, which upon their discovery by Europeans destabilized the very meaning of civilization by proving that highly sophisticated societies emerged independently elsewhere. They came as such a shock that some to this day still believe their cities were the work of aliens.

In the British Museum ancient objects scream the truth silently. Take a walk up to the plaster cast of a relief from the temple of Beit el-Wali in Lower Nubia, built by the pharaoh Ramesses II, who died in 1213 BCE. It's high, near the ceiling, and spans almost the entire gallery. See the pharaoh depicted as an impressive figure on a chariot, wearing a tall blue headdress and brandishing a bow and arrow, his skin painted burnt ochre. He is plowing into a legion of Nubians, dressed in leopard skins, some warriors painted black and some painted the same ochre as him. He sends their limbs into a tangle before they're finally conquered. As the relief shows, the Egyptians at that time believed themselves to be a superior people with the most advanced culture, imposing order on chaos. The racial hierarchy, if that's what you want to call it, looked this way in this time and place.

Then things changed. Downstairs on the ground floor is a granite sphinx from a century or two later, a reminder of the time when the Kushites, an ancient Nubian kingdom located in present-day Sudan, invaded Egypt. There was a new winner now, and the ram sphinx protecting King Taharqa illustrates how this conquering force took Egyptian culture and appropriated

it. The Kushites built their own pyramids, in the same way that the British replicated ancient Greek architecture. Taharqa was a black king of Egypt. Through objects like this, one can see how power balances shifted throughout history. They reveal a less simple version of the past, of who we are. And it's a version that demands humility, warning us that knowledge is not just an account of what we know, but has to be understood as something shaped by those who happen to hold power when the account was written. A hundred years is nothing; everything can change completely within a millennium.

The Ancient Egypt galleries of the British Museum are always the most crowded, especially the small selfie-worthy space directly in front of the Rosetta Stone. What we don't think as we walk past the mummies in their glittering cases is that this is also a mausoleum. We're surrounded by the skeletons of real people who lived in a civilization no less remarkable than the ones that followed or that went before. Every society that happens to be dominant comes to think of itself as being the best, deep down. The more powerful we humans become, the more our power begins to be framed as natural as well as cultural. We paint our enemies as ugly foreigners and our subordinates as inferior. We invent hierarchies, give meaning to our own racial categories. One day, five thousand years forward, in another museum in another nation, these could be European or American bones encased in glass, what were once considered advanced societies replaced by new ones. History is never over. No place or people has a claim on superiority.

Race is the counter-argument. Race is at its heart the belief that we are born different, deep inside our bodies, perhaps even in character and intellect, as well as in outward appearance. It's the notion that groups of people have certain innate qualities that not only are visible at the surface of their skins but also run down into their innate capacities, that perhaps even help define the passage of progress, the success and failure of the nations our ancestors came from.

And it's so tempting to feel this. Many of those who come to the museum for the first time—I can tell you this from having spent hours watching them—are looking for their own place in these galleries. The Chinese tourists go straight to the Tang dynasty artifacts; the Greeks, to the Parthenon marbles. The first time I came here, I made a beeline for the Indian galleries. My parents were born in India, as were their parents, and theirs before them, so in the museum's Indian galleries was where I imagined I would find the objects most relevant to my personal history. All visitors have the same curious desire to know who their ancestors were, to know what *their* people

achieved. We want to see ourselves in the past, forgetting that everything in the museum belongs to us all as human beings. We are each products of it all.

But, of course, that's not the lesson we take away, because that's not what the museum was designed to tell us. Objects here are trapped inside glass cabinets, under tight security as though any of them might dare to leap back thousands of miles to where they were created. Why are they in these rooms, and not where they were first shaped, built, painted, carved, or erected? Why do they live inside this museum in London, its neoclassical columns today stretching into the wet and gray sky? Why are the bones of Africans here, and not where they were buried, in the magnificent tombs that were created for them, where they were supposed to live out eternity?

Because this is how power works. It takes, it claims, and it keeps. It makes you believe that this is where the objects belong. It's designed to put you in your place.

I was once told of an elderly man in Bangalore, in south India, who ate his chapatis with a knife and fork because this was how the British ate. These notions of superiority and inferiority impact us all. When my great-grandfather fought in the First World War for the British Empire and when my grandfather fought in the Second World War for the British Empire, their contributions were forgotten, like those of countless other Indian soldiers. They were never considered strictly equal to their white counterparts. This is how it was. When boys from my school threw rocks at me and my sister when I was ten years old, telling us to go home, this is how it was.

The global power balance, as it played out in the eighteenth century, meant that treasures from all over the world could and would only end up in a museum like this one, because Britain was one of the strongest nations at the time. It, along with other European powers, were the latest colonizers, the most recent winners. So they gave themselves the right to take things. They gave themselves the right to document history their way, to define the scientific facts about humankind. Just as the United States would later, when it became the global superpower. Throughout, white thinkers told us that their cultures were better, that they were the proprietors of thought and reason, and they married this with the notion that they belonged to superior races. These became our realities.

The truth is something else.

CHAPTER 1

Deep Time

Are we one human species, or aren't we?

I am on a road dotted with the corpses of unlucky kangaroos, just under two hundred miles inland from the western Australian city of Perth—at the other end of the world from where I call home. It feels like a wilderness. Everything is alien to my eyes. Birds I've never seen before make sounds I've never heard before. The dead branches of silvery trees, skeleton fingers, extend out of crumbly red soil. Gigantic rocks weathered over billions of years into soft pastel blobs resemble mossy spaceships. I imagine I've been transported to a galaxy beyond time, one in which humans have no place.

Except that inside a dark shelter beneath one undulating boulder are handprints.

Mulka's Cave is one of many ancient rock-art sites dotted across Australia, but this one is unique in this particular region for being so densely packed with images. I have to crouch to enter, navigating the darkness. One hand is all I see at first, stenciled within a spray of red ochre illuminated on the granite by a diffuse shaft of light. My eyes adjust, more hands appear. Infant hands and adult hands, hands on top of hands, hands all over the ceiling—hundreds of them in reds, yellows, oranges, and whites. As they become clearer in the half-light, it's as though they're pushing through the walls for a high five. There are parallel lines, too, maybe delineating the vague outline of a dingo.

The images are hard to date. Some may well be thousands of years old; others, very recent. What is known is that the creation of rock art on this continent goes back to what in cultural terms feels like the dawn of time. Following excavation at the Madjedbebe rock shelter, in Arnhem Land in

northern Australia in 2017, the duration of modern human presence here was set conservatively at around 60,000 years—far longer than members of our species have lived in Europe, and long enough for people here to have witnessed an ice age, as well as the extinction of the giant mammals. And they may have been making art at the outset. At the Madjedbebe site, I'm told by one archaeologist who worked there, researchers found ochre "crayons" worked down to a nub. At another Australian site, this one 42,000 years old, there is evidence of ceremonial burial, bodies sprinkled with ochre pigment that would have to have been transported there over hundreds of miles.

"Something like a handprint is likely to have many different meanings in different societies and even within a society," I'm told by Benjamin Smith, a British-born rock-art expert based at the University of Western Australia. It may signify place, possibly to assert that someone was here. But determining meaning is not always simple. The more experts like him have tried to decipher ancient art, wherever it is in the world, the more they've found themselves only scratching the surface of systems of thought so deep that Western philosophical traditions can't contain them. In Australia a rock isn't just a rock. The relationship that indigenous communities have to the land, even to inanimate natural objects, is practically boundless—everyone and everything is intertwined.

What at first looks to me to be an alien wilderness isn't wild at all. It's a home that is more lived in than any other that I can imagine. Countless generations have absorbed and built upon knowledge of food sources and navigation. They have shaped the landscape sustainably over millennia, built a spiritual relationship with it and its unique flora and fauna. As I learn slowly, in the thinking of Aboriginal Australians, individuals seem to melt away in the world around them. Time, space, and object take on different dimensions. And none except those who have grown up immersed in this culture and place can quite understand. I know that I could spend the rest of my life trying to fathom it and get no further than I am now, standing lonely in this cave.

We can't inhabit minds that aren't our own.

I was a teenager before I discovered that my mother might not actually know her own birthdate. We were celebrating her birthday on the same day we always did in October when she told us in passing that her sisters thought she had actually been born in the summer. Pinning down dates wasn't routine when she was growing up in India. It surprised me that she didn't care, and my surprise made her laugh. What mattered to her instead was her

intricate web of family relationships, her place in society, her fate as mapped in the stars. So I learned that the things we value are what we know. I'm obsessed by dates, but this is because I went to school in Britain. I compare every city I visit to London, where I was born. It's the center of my universe.

For archaeologists interpreting the past, deciphering cultures that aren't their own is the challenge. "Archaeologists have struggled for a long time to determine what it is, what is that unique trait, what makes us special," says Smith, who as well as working in Australia has spent sixteen years at sites in South Africa. It's work that has taken him to the cradles of humankind, where he has rummaged through the remains of the beginning of our species. And it's a difficult business. It's surprisingly tough to date exactly when *Homo sapiens* emerged. Fossils of people who shared our facial features have been found that date from 300,000 to 100,000 years ago. Evidence of art or at least the use of ochre is reliably available in Africa far further back than 100,000 years, before some of our ancestors began venturing out of the continent and slowly populating other parts of the world, including Australia. "It's one of the things that sets us apart as a species, the ability to make complex art," Smith says.

But even if our ancestors were making art a hundred millennia ago, the world then was nothing like the world now. More than forty thousand years ago there weren't just modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, roaming the planet, but also archaic humans, including Neanderthals (sometimes called cavemen because their bones have been found in caves) who lived in Europe and parts of western and central Asia. And there were Denisovans, we now know, another archaic human whose remains have been found in limestone caves in Siberia; their territory possibly extended to Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea. There were also at various times in the past many other kinds of human, most of which haven't yet been identified or named.

In the deep past we shared the planet, even living alongside each other at certain times, in particular places. For some academics this cosmopolitan moment in our ancient history lies at the heart of what it means to be modern. When we imagine these other kinds of human, it's often as knuckle-dragging primitives. We *Homo sapiens* must have had qualities that they didn't have, something that gave us an edge, the ability to survive and thrive as they went extinct. The word "Neanderthal" has long been a term of abuse. Dictionaries define it both as an extinct species of human that lived in ice age Europe and as an uncivilized, uncouth man of low intelligence. Neanderthals and even *Homo erectus* made stone tools like our own species,

Homo sapiens, Smith explains, but as far as convincing evidence goes, he believes none had the same capacity to think symbolically, to talk in past and future tenses, to produce art quite like our own. These are the things that made us modern.

What separated "us" from "them" goes to the core of who we are. But it's not just a question for the past. Today being human might seem so patently clear, so beyond need for clarification, that we forget that once it wasn't so. The boundaries are still plagued by uncertainty. Scientific debate around what makes a modern human a *modern* human is as contentious as it has ever been. There are even quiet doubts about just how much the "same" all *Homo sapiens* living today really are. One old scientific theory claimed that, since we know there were other types of human alive tens of thousands of years ago in various parts of the world, maybe different races are in fact the descendants of these separate archaic forms?

From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, this might sound absurd. The common, mainstream view is that we have shared origins, as described by the "out of Africa" hypothesis. Scientific data has confirmed in recent decades that *Homo sapiens* evolved from a population of people in Africa before some of these people began migrating to the rest of the world around 100,000 years ago and then began adapting in small ways to their own particular environmental conditions. Within Africa, too, there was adaptation and change, depending on where people lived. Overall, however, modern humans were then and remain now one species, *Homo sapiens*. We are special. It's nothing less than a scientific creed.

But this view isn't shared universally within academia, nor is it even the mainstream belief in certain countries, including China. There are still scientists who ask, with perfectly serious faces, whether different populations actually evolved separately into modern humans—maybe leading to what we think of as racial difference. There are those who think that rather than modern humans migrating out of Africa, populations on each continent actually emerged into modernity separately from ancestors who lived there as far back as millions of years ago. They tell us we only need to travel into deep time to find our answers.

As unconscionable as it may seem, some suspect that population groups—perhaps equating to "races"—may have evolved into modern human beings in different ways.

In one early account of indigenous Australians by a European, a seventeenth-century English pirate and explorer, William Dampier, called them "the miserablest people in the world."

Dampier and the British colonists who followed him to the continent dismissed their new neighbors as savages who had been trapped in cultural stasis since they had migrated or emerged here, however long ago that was. Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin, cultural scholars based at Western Sydney University, document how the initial reaction of Europeans in Australia was sheer puzzlement. "The non-cultivating Aborigine bewildered the early colonists," they write. The Aboriginals didn't build houses, they didn't have agriculture, they didn't rear livestock. The colonists couldn't figure out why these people, if they were equally human, hadn't "improved" themselves by adopting these things. Why weren't the Aboriginals more like them?

There was more to this than culture shock. Bewilderment—or rather, an unwillingness to try and understand the continent's original inhabitants—suited Europeans in the eighteenth century because it also served the belief that they were entering a territory they could justly claim for themselves. The landscape was thought to be no different from how it must have been in the beginning, because they couldn't recognize how it might have been changed by the people living there. And if the land hadn't been cultivated, then by Western legal measures it was *terra nullius*—it didn't belong to anyone.

By the same token, if its inhabitants belonged to the past, to a time before modernity, their days were also numbered. "Indigenous Australians were considered to be primitive, a fossilized stage in human evolution," I'm told by Billy Griffiths, a young Australian historian who has documented the story of archaeology in his country, challenging the narrative that once painted indigenous peoples as evolutionarily backward. At least one early explorer even refused to believe they had created the rock art he saw. They were viewed as "an earlier stage of Western history, a living representative of an ancient form, a stepping stone." From almost the first encounter, Aboriginal Australians were judged to have no history of their own, to have survived in isolation as a flashback to how all humans might have lived before some became civilized. In 1958 the distinguished Australian archaeologist John Mulvaney wrote that Victorians saw Australia as a "museum of primeval humanity." Even at the end of the twentieth century, writers and scholars routinely called them Stone Age people.

It's true that these are cultures that have long connections to their ancestors, a continuation of traditions that go back millennia. "The deep past is

a living heritage," Griffiths tells me. For Aboriginal Australians, "It's something they feel in their bones. . . . There are amazing stories of dramatic events that are preserved in oral histories, oral traditions, such as the rising of the seas at the end of the last ice age, and hills becoming islands, the eruption of volcanoes in western Victoria, even meteorites in different times." But this doesn't mean that ways of life have never changed. European colonizers failed to see this, and it would take until the second half of the twentieth century for that view to be corrected.

"There was certainly little respect for the remarkable systems of understanding and land management that indigenous Australians had cultivated over millennia," explains Griffiths. For thousands of years the land has been embedded with stories and songs, cultivated with digging sticks and fire and by hand. "While people have lived in Australia, there's been enormous environmental change as well as social change, political change, cultural change." Their lives have never been static. In his 2014 book *Dark Emu*, *Black Seeds* writer Bruce Pascoe argues, as other scholars have done, that this engagement with the land was so sophisticated and successful, including the harvesting of crops and fish, that it amounted to farming and agriculture.

But whatever they saw, the colonizers didn't value. Even now, for those raised in and around cities, industrialization is what represents civilization. Respect for and pride in indigenous cultures has only started to build in the last few decades, but even then, there is resistance among some nonindigenous Australians—especially as it has become clear from archaeological evidence that Aboriginal Australians have been occupying this territory not for thousands of years but for many tens of thousands. "The mid-twentieth century revelation that people were here for that kind of depth of time . . . was received in many ways as a challenge to a settler nation with a very shallow history. There are cultural anxieties wrapped up in all of this," says Griffiths. "It challenges the legitimacy of white presence here."

For those with a deeper sense of the past, Benjamin Smith says "the idea of ranking, say, an industrial society higher than a hunter-gatherer society is absurd." It's not easy to accept when you've grown up in a society that tells you concrete skyscrapers are the symbols of advanced culture, but when viewed from the perspective of deep time—across millennia rather than centuries, in the context of long historical trajectories—it becomes clearer. Empires and cities decline and fall. It is smaller, indigenous communities who survive throughout, whose societies date to many thousands rather than many hundreds of years old. "Archaeology shows us that all societies are incredibly

sophisticated, they are just sophisticated in different ways," Smith continues. "These are the world's thinkers, and maybe they thought themselves into a better place. They have societies that have more leisure time than Western societies, lower suicide rates, higher standards of living in many ways, even though they don't have all of the technological sophistication."

Clearly, this wasn't the view of nineteenth-century European colonists. There was a failure to engage with those they encountered, to accept them as the true inhabitants of the land, combined with a mercenary hastiness to write them off. Like the native people of Tierra del Fuego at the southernmost tip of South America, whose nakedness and apparent savagery shocked biologist Charles Darwin when he saw them on his travels, indigenous Australians and Tasmanians were seen as occupying the lowest rungs in the human racial hierarchy. One observer described them as "descending to the grave." They were seen as doomed to go extinct, Griffiths tells me: "That was the dominant concept, that they would soon die out. There was a lot of talk of smoothing the pillow of a dying race."

"Smoothing the pillow" was bloodthirsty work. Disease was the greatest killer, the forerunner of invasion, he notes. But starting in September 1794, six years after the first fleet of British ships arrived in what was to become Sydney, and continuing into the twentieth century, hundreds of massacres also helped to slowly and steadily shrink the indigenous population by around 80 percent, according to some estimates. Many hundreds of thousands of people died, if not of smallpox and other illnesses brought to Australia, then directly at the hands of individuals or gangs and at other times of police. Equally harsh was the cultural genocide, says Griffiths. There were bans on the practice of culture and use of language. "Many people hid their identity, which also contributed to the decline in population."

In 1869 the Australian government passed legislation allowing children to be forcibly taken away from their parents, particularly if they had mixed heritage—described at the time as "half-caste," "quarter-caste," and smaller fractions. An official inquiry into the effects of this policy on the indelibly scarred "Stolen Generations," finally published in 1997, is a catalogue of horrors. In Queensland and Western Australia, for example, people were forced onto government settlements and missions, and children were removed from about the age of four and placed in dormitories, before being sent off to work at the age of fourteen. "Indigenous girls who became pregnant were sent back to the mission or dormitory to have their child," says Griffiths. "The removal process then repeated itself."

By the 1930s around half of Queensland's Aboriginal Australian population was living in institutions. Life was bleak, with high rates of illness and malnutrition, and the people's behavior strictly policed for fear that they would return to the "immoral" ways of their home communities. Children were able to leave dormitories and missions only to provide cheap labor, the girls as domestic servants and the boys as farm laborers. They were considered mentally unsuited to any other kind of work. The historian Meg Parsons describes what happened as the "remaking of Aboriginal bodies into suitable subjects and workers for White Queensland."

Among those forced to live this way were the mother and grandmother of Gail Beck, an indigenous activist in Perth who was once a nurse but now works at the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, fighting to reclaim land rights for her local community, the Noongar. When I visit her at her home in the picturesque port city of Fremantle, speaking to her as she cooks while awaiting a visit from the Aboriginal Australian side of her family, I find someone who has few ways to quantify the pain and loss.

Gail is sixty years old, but her true family story is still fairly new to her. Until she was in her thirties, she didn't even know she had any indigenous ancestry. She had been raised to believe she was Italian—a lie to explain her olive skin, her mother terrified that if she told the truth, her daughter might be taken away by the authorities as she herself had been. So Gail lived under a conspiracy of silence, shielded from the fact that her grandmother had been one of the Stolen Generations, a "half caste" taken from her family to live in a Catholic missionary home in 1911 at the age of two. There, she had been abused, physically, mentally, sexually. "She was put out to service at thirteen. Didn't get paid, nothing like that. And she stayed there until she was an adult." A similar fate fell on Gail's mother, who was under the supervisory care of the nuns in the home from the day she was born, beaten and burned by them when she grew older. The Sisters of Mercy "were very cruel people," Gail recounts.

Learning about her family's past, and having it confirmed by her grandmother's papers, was a bolt from the blue. "I cried an ocean of tears." At once Gail gained a new identity, one that she was desperate to understand and build a connection to. It took her six years to find the part of her family that had been hidden from her, and she has devoted herself to absorbing their culture ever since. She shows me her blankets and pictures, adorned with the prints for which Aboriginal Australian artists have lately become famous. She has tried to learn an indigenous language, but it has been a

struggle. She lives like most white Australians, in a nice house in a nice suburb, her knowledge of her great-grandmother's way of life, as it would have been, piecemeal.

"We are constantly in mourning, and people don't understand that," she tells me. "The young children that were lost, that doesn't just affect the nuclear family, that affects the community." And this is perhaps the greatest tragedy of all, that the way of life she might have had, the knowledge and language she could have been raised with, the relationship to nature, all of this was trodden beneath the boot of what considered itself to be a superior race. After the arrival of the Europeans, even the creation of art sharply declined. It took until 1976 for Aboriginal people even to be able to gain legal rights over their land. Throughout, the victims had no choice. "They weren't allowed to practice their culture, they weren't allowed to mix, and they weren't allowed to speak their language." Having been told they were inferior, that theirs was a life to be ashamed of, they adopted different ways of living—ways they were told were better.

"It was a real shameful thing."

I don't cry easily. But in the car afterwards, I cry for Gail Beck. There is no scale of justice large enough to account for what happened. Not just for the abuse and the trauma, the children torn from their parents, the killings, but also for the lives that women and men like her didn't have the chance to live.

In recent decades, as scholars have tried to piece together the past and make sense of what happened, as they share with Australians in the long process of assessing the damage and its impact, we see an overarching story about how to define human difference. It is about where people have drawn boundaries around other groups of people, about how far inside us and how far back in time the disparities are thought to stretch. These are the parameters of what we now call race.

I meet with Martin Porr, a German archaeologist at the University of Western Australia whose work focuses on human origins. He feels, as do many archaeologists nowadays, that his profession is weighed down by the baggage of colonialism. When the first European encounters with Australians occurred, when the rules were drawn for how to treat indigenous peoples, science and archaeology began to be woven in. And they have remained interwoven ever since.

For Porr, this tale begins with the Enlightenment, at the birth of Western science. The Enlightenment reinforced the idea of human unity, of an essential biological quality that elevated humans above all other creatures. We live with this concept to this day, seeing it as positive and inclusive, a fact to be celebrated. There was a caveat, however. As Porr cautions, this modern universal way of framing human origins was constructed at a time when the world was a very different place: when European thinkers set the standard for what they considered a modern human, many built it around their own experiences and what they happened to value culturally at that time. To be fair, this was their lens through which everything was refracted in the same way that I compare every city to London. Those who lived in other lands, including the indigenous people of the New World and Australia, were at that time often a mystery to Europeans.

A number of Enlightenment thinkers, including influential German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, defined humanity without really having much of an idea how most of humanity lived or what it looked like. "A universal understanding of human origins was actually created at the time by white men in Europe who only had indirect access to information about other people in the world through the lens of colonialism," explains Porr. So when they went out into the real world and encountered people who didn't look like them, who lived in ways they didn't choose to live, the first question they were forced to ask themselves was: Are they the same as *us*? The problem was that, because of the narrow parameters they established of what constituted a human being, setting themselves as the benchmark, other cultures were almost guaranteed not to fit. In universalizing humanity by seeing themselves as the paradigm, they had laid the foundations for dividing it.

"If you define humanity in some universal sense, then it's very restrictive. And in the eighteenth century, that was totally Eurocentric. And of course, when you define it in that sense, then of course, so to speak, other people do not meet these standards," Porr says.

"When you look at these giants of the eighteenth century, Kant and Hegel, they were terribly racist. They were unbelievably racist!" Kant stated in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* in 1764, "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling." When he met a quick-witted carpenter, he quickly dismissed him with the observation that "this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid." While a few Enlightenment thinkers did resist

the idea of a racial hierarchy, many, including the French philosopher Voltaire and the English thinker David Hume, saw no contradiction between the values of liberty and fraternity and their belief that nonwhites were innately inferior to whites.

And here lay the flaw at the heart of modern science, one that would persist for centuries—arguably to this day. It is a science of human origins, as the British anthropologist Tim Ingold observes, that "has written the essence of humanity in its own image, and that measures other people by how far they have come in living up to it."

By the nineteenth century, those who didn't live like Europeans were thought not yet to have fully realized their potential as human beings. Even now, Porr notes that when scientists discuss human origins, he still catches them describing *Homo sapiens* as "better" and "faster" than and "superior" to other human species—easily interpreted as economic terms. There's an implicit assumption that higher productivity and more mastery over nature, the presence of settlements and cities, are the marks of human progress, even of the evolution of mankind. The more superior we are to nature, the more superior we are as humans. It is a way of thinking that still forces a ranking of people from closer to nature to more distant, from less developed to more, from worse to better.

History shows us that it's only a small leap from believing in cultural superiority to believing in biological superiority, that a group's achievements result from their innate capacities.

What Europeans saw as cultural shortcomings in other populations in the early nineteenth century soon became conflated with how they looked. The cultural scholars Anderson and Perrin explain how, in the nineteenth century, race came to be *everything*. One writer at the time noted that the natives of Australia differ "from any other race of men in features, complexion, habits and language." The fact they had darker skin and different facial features became markers of their separateness, a sign of their permanent difference. Their perceived failure to cultivate the land, to domesticate animals, and live in houses was taken part and parcel with their appearance. This had wider implications. Race, rather than history, could then be framed as the explanation for not only *their* failure, but for the failures of all nonwhite races to live up to the European ideal that Europeans themselves had defined. An Aboriginal Australian—just by virtue of having darker skin—could now be lumped together with a West African, despite their being continents apart and possessing different cultures and histories.

Whiteness became the visible measure of human modernity—an ideal that went so far as to become enshrined in Australian law. The historian Billy Griffiths explains: "When Australia federated in 1901, when the states came together as a nation, one of the first pieces of legislation to pass through Parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act, which formed the basis of the White Australia policy (strikingly similar to US policies against non-Northern European immigration around the same time). It sought to fuse the new nation together with whiteness by excluding non-European migration and attempting to assimilate and, ultimately, to eliminate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity." What happened to Gail Beck's family was part of these attempts to remove the color from Australia, in her case to breed it out of her mother's line over generations. "There was this horrible language of 'breeding out' the color from full-bloods to half-castes to quarter-castes to octoroons," Griffiths tells me. The goal was to steadily replace one "race" with another.

At the same time as this state-sanctioned ethnic cleansing was taking place, a crisis was emerging within scientific circles. For more than a century, most European thinkers had united around the Enlightenment idea that humankind was one, that we all shared the same common capacities, the same spark of humanity that made it possible for even those of us condemned as "miserable" by Europeans to improve, with enough encouragement. Even if there was a racial hierarchy, even if there were lesser humans and greater ones, we were all still *human*. But as Europeans encountered more people in other parts of the world, as they began to see the variety that exists across our species, and failed to "improve" people the way they wanted to, some began to seriously doubt this cherished belief.

Scientists ventured to wonder whether we all really did belong to the same species.

The course of the nineteenth century saw some take an intellectual shift away from the Enlightenment view of a single humanity with shared origins. This wasn't always just because of racism. Scientists had been funneled into a certain way of thinking about the world partly because of where they happened to be based. In the early days of archaeology, Europe was the reference point for subsequent research elsewhere. Before anyone was sure about humanity's African origins, human fossils in Europe provided the first data. According to John Shea, a professor of anthropology at Stony Brook University in New York, this created an indexing problem: setting European archaeological finds as the reference point for future discoveries, thus

were a lot more refined than previously thought." An archaeologist in Spain claimed that modern humans and Neanderthals must have been "cognitively indistinguishable." A few even raised the possibility that Neanderthals could have been capable of symbolic thought, pointing to freshly discovered cave markings in Spain that appear to predate the arrival of modern humans (the finding failed to convince Benjamin Smith).

"Neanderthals are romanticized," John Shea tells me. They're no longer around, and we don't have a great deal of evidence about what they were like or how they lived, which means they can be whatever we want them to be. "We're free to project good qualities, things we admire, and the ideal on them." In reality, whatever they were like, he says, "The interbreeding thing is more like a symbolic thing for us than it is of evolutionary consequence."

Yet researchers haven't been able to help themselves from looking for evolutionary consequences. One team of scientists claimed that the tiny peppering of Neanderthal DNA may have given Europeans different immune systems from Africans. Another published paper linked Neanderthal DNA to a whole host of human differences, including "skin tone and hair color, height, sleeping patterns, mood, and smoking status." An American research group went so far as to try to link the amount of Neanderthal DNA people have with the shape of their brain, implying that non-Africans may have some mental differences from Africans as a result of their interbreeding ancestors.

For more than a century the word "Neanderthal" had been synonymous with low intelligence. In the space of a decade, once the genetic link to modern Europeans was suspected, that all changed. In the popular press, there was a flurry of excitement about our hitherto undervalued relatives. Headlines proclaimed that "we haven't been giving Neanderthals enough credit" (*Popular Science*), that they "were too smart for their own good" (*The Telegraph*), that "humans didn't outsmart the Neanderthals" (*Washington Post*). Meanwhile a piece in the *New Yorker* whimsically reflected on their apparent everyday similarity to humans, including the finding that they may have suffered from psoriasis. Poor things, they even itched like us. "With each new discovery, the distance between them and us seems to narrow," wrote the author. In the popular imagination, the family tree had gained a new member.

In January 2017 the *New York Times* ran a story headlined "Neanderthals Were People, Too" and asked, "Why did science get them so wrong?" This was indeed the big question. If the definition of "people" had always included archaic humans, then why should Neanderthals so suddenly and so generously be accepted as "people" now? And not just accepted, but elevated

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