

The Whale, Snake, and Elephant

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I have kept my studio in DUMBO since 2002, and though I am far from one of its pioneers, I retain a memory of when this neighborhood was still a frontier, and I stood witness to its last gasp before giving way to the onslaught of “development”.

On the surface, it's a typical case of gentrification: the frenzy of migrant life stylers looking for the next hot neighborhood that they can move into and wear as fashion. But the cause of what has happened to DUMBO comes from a much deeper source, systemic to the American character: our creation myth of *Manifest Destiny*.

Early Puritan settlers referred to it as “the errand into the wilderness” in which they granted themselves the morality of providence to subdue and exploit the “virgin” land and everything in it for their own purposes. It was essentially spin to justify helping themselves to the vast stretch of continent that lay before them and it set in place the tenaciously enduring assumption that we are very special children: that what we want, we can take, that we are entitled to it without question, and that there will always be more.

This instilled sense of expansiveness and blind optimism rendered a complete lack of consciousness of the possibility that our excess would deplete our bounty, and furthermore, that if it did, it would be our fault. We were raised to believe that there would always be a horizon to rush towards with no need or time to contemplate what it was that we rolled over to get there. Our purpose in work was to obtain, and it was the kind of toil and industry that does not allow any loose space for introspection.

I do not need to underscore the fate to which this attitude has lead us. The situation that we now find ourselves in is clear to everyone but the most isolated troglodyte. At the very least, consumers are freaked out about gas prices. But to those who have been paying attention, the shit that is hitting the fan has been coming for a very long time. And there were those who saw it coming and nailed it at its core from the prescient distance of 160 -190 years ago, when this country was still in its formative stages: Herman Melville, who wrote *Moby Dick*, in 1851, and Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote *Democracy in America*, in 1832. ¹

Our “errand into the wilderness” was essentially converting open land to occupied real estate. What was once uncharted territory was appropriated, subdivided and fenced in by an overlaying grid. And once one section became surfeited by development, we would move on to the next vista. We did so because we were assured that it was our right, and that unbounding consumption was the most salient expression of our freedom.

Our “errand into the wilderness” was also a process of erasure, which included the Native population and their way of life. What we did not annihilate, we forced into compliance with our dominance. It is poignant to remember that the first Director of Indian Affairs proclaimed that common property (or *communitas* ²) and Capitalism could not coexist and that the last blow in destroying the Native American's way of life would be to “attach him to private property”, or more accurately, to chain him to the

grid. Therefore, in order for *Manifest Destiny*, (a synonym for the American People) to succeed, all free, open and uncharted space as well as its inhabitants had to be brought under submission.

It goes without saying that one population driving out another has been going on for centuries, using a variety and any combination of techniques, but it has always meant the same thing to the displaced: they lose their home and their ability to survive within the new dominant culture.

I once had a conversation with a corporate lawyer, (who was aggressively hitting on me at an art opening), in which he told me to lighten up, accept that gentrification is within the natural order of things, like Darwin's theory of survival, and roll with the changes. My answer was that it was easy for someone who doesn't stand to lose anything from those changes, and/or benefits from them, to see their privilege as "the natural order of things", and dismiss the price that has been paid for it at someone else's expense. And furthermore, gentrification is a completely different thing from the vantage point of the person for whom eviction is real: who actually loses their home, studio and way of life with few options of where to go next. To my delight, my candid retort set him back, and he finally slithered away.

The "wilderness" that we invaded was of course real land, but it was also a negative metaphor for the unknown. It was threatening because it was independent, off the grid, not within the bounds of our regularity. Much of the propaganda of *Manifest Destiny* demonized the wilderness as being full of beasts (including the Natives), darkness and chaos.

For example, *American Progress*, painted in 1872 by John Gast, shows *America*, (a white blonde woman in white diaphanous robes, who resembles a giant angel), floating over the plains like a squeegee in a western direction. In her wake is a gleaming white light, a beacon that shows the way for the ensuing trail of farmers, stage coaches, the railway and the telegraph. Before her looms the darkness, with terrified wild beasts, buffalo and Indians fleeing for the mountains. Like Fox TV, people believed it as an icon of their faith, and gratefully accepted the permission it granted them to penetrate the continent, in haste and guilt free.

Even the Webster Dictionary's definition of "wilderness" is disparaging, as if there is something inherently evil about it. It refers to wilderness as "uncultivated" "confused" "waste" and "empty".

But to the Natives who lived here before us, the wilderness was not empty, uncultivated or confused; it was home, and it contained all things that are life.

So truly, reality is defined by the conquerers and it doesn't serve their rhetoric to acknowledge what preceded them as valuable, much less its disappearance as a loss. As with the perpetual story of invasion and diaspora, the conquering people tend to dehumanize their predecessors, or at least neutralize them with invisibility as a useful device for the justification of their take over.

The wilderness is also a metaphor for art, because it comes from the imagination and unconscious. Its motivation is internal and harder to pin down. It grows out of entropy and hidden patterns of interconnection that flow along organic fault lines, and it does not fit within a rigid structure. It's at its best when it is uncharted territory,

and what's required to enter it is trust and curiosity, not aggression.

When DUMBO was a wilderness, the only people who were comfortable living here were artists. They did not see its liminality as dark and impenetrable, but as open space, a pocket of freedom and privacy in which to live their natural lives and do what they do.

It is obvious that art cannot exist without a place for artists to live and work. But it is not an over statement, because for some reason, mainstream American culture doesn't seem to connect the necessity of art, (at least as a flourish, an accouterment of sophistication or a perfunctory tool for PR), to the fact that it's living artists who actually produce it.

Art, along with writing, has always been the primary insignia of higher civilization. It is the footprint left behind in posterity. And though our National origin is Puritan, a doctrine that is suspicious of art, and all things outside of ascetic industry, we still need it to prove our superiority as a world power. Every empire needed it. Rome needed it. But what we want with expediency is the end product, while we simultaneously begrudge the allowances required to enable it. Our National neglect of Arts Funding and Education immediately come to mind as examples. And the business of real estate, along with its entitled and hungry clientele, follows suit.

This discrepancy in Pythagorean logic, between the demand for material supply, (and in the case of "cutting edge" neighborhoods, a bohemian atmosphere), and the simultaneous squelching of its resources (the sustenance of living artists and their habitat of liminal spaces) does not seem to be an issue. It is merely sloughed off as "the natural order of things", because depleting a raw resource without leaving it the means to replenish itself on its own terms is simply the American Way.

Sometimes artists can adapt, if they do their job and make corporations, governments and institutions look good. And if they do, they are tolerated and even rewarded with star status. But as a demographic, artists are still chaff, left to float about until they are occasionally needed for party fodder, PR or as the reigning management of real estate in DUMBO put it "color".

As it goes, most liminal spaces in DUMBO are extinct, and most of the indigenous artists who lived in them are gone too. What remains of their presence is the DUMBO brand. As the influx of people looking for the promised land pours in, the authenticity of the wilderness that existed here before has been replaced by a romantic notion of it; idealized, mediated and sanitized for the looky loos. ³

I once found myself explaining the difference between the old DUMBO and the new by contrasting two installations related to the elephant that took place at the DUMBO Arts Festival, spread 5 years apart.

The first, in 2003, was a magical sound piece entitled *Endangered Species* conceived by Michelle Handelman and engineered by Vincent Baker. It replicated the trumpeting of an elephant in captivity, emanating from behind the rampart of sheet metal that blocks off the archway under the Manhattan Bridge. As a piece of conceptual art, it worked because the

elephant became animated and real in the viewer's imagination. Simply through sound and context, one could sense the beast's presence and its mass, and in doing so, the whole environment shifted. Michelle told me the other day that she may have about one more year before she too, has to go.

Conversely, in 2007, the dominant real estate company of DUMBO installed a real live elephant in the center section of the neighborhood, complete with a beret and paint brush. Everyone I knew who saw it told me that the elephant was miserable, and that the ploy came off more as a display of animal abuse than the marketing gimmick that it intended.

I've heard the overseeing management complain that they have been unjustly accused of driving out the artists, and they fortify this argument with their public attempts to reinstall an art scene, but in a cleaned up, Disneyland kind of way. They claim that they have not compromised the integrity of their brand, and the proof is the hefty and even sprinkling the art institutions that they have been rushing to underwrite, like an abbreviated game of Monopoly that ends in a neat pile. All venues are under the lease of their central authority, corralled as evidence of the righteousness of their omnipresence.

But art institutions aren't artists, and the artists they do bring into the neighborhood are transitory, and under the umbrella of residencies and exhibition programming. Consequently, the majority of art that is visible in DUMBO is sponsored and it carries the mark of institutionalized approval. It is art that has left the wilderness, (and in the current climate of an art market that plucks it straight out of art school, art that never entered it), carefully chosen for its correct and de rigueur appearance and references. Yes there are still artists in DUMBO, but they're inside the fence, not allowed to wander outside of it and certainly not allowed to linger long enough to claim a stake in the community, or make trouble as a body politic. They can be a poster child but not a citizen, unless they can afford "market", which of course, they can't.

I once read a piece in the *New York Metro* in which a DUMBO Leasing Manager snidely retorted in reference to the mass evictions of indigenous DUMBO artists that he's willing to rent to artists but only the "real ones", in other words, the ones who have "made it" and can afford to live in DUMBO. So then, in his stunningly boorish view, Robert Rauschenberg, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louis Nevelson, Agnes Martin, Kiki Smith, Gordon Matta-Clark, Jackson Pollock, Patti Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe, David Byrne, Spaulding Grey, Chuck Close, John Currin, etc, etc, etc were not "real artists" when they came to New York City. Why? Because they were such losers that they needed affordable rent and a real community in order to do their work.

What the spin fails to dispel is that it is the population of independent artists, the ones who paid rent and were real citizens, that has been decimated to a fraction of its former size. And it's a fact validated by other real citizens who have witnessed it, like the owners of Superfine, who are pioneers and could probably submit a long list of names from instant recall, or the guy in the hardware store who jokingly refers to us as "the Last of the Mohicans".

Indeed, as I walk down Front Street, in my vagabond studio grubbies, I often encounter tacit looks of consternation, as if I am some how out of place. I am riff raff to the tourists, fashionistas and self consciously style driven "ground population", installed for their singular attraction to retail and prepackaged chic; and who for one reason or another cannot make the connection between the reason why DUMBO was marketed as artsy and the fact that artists actually used to roam freely here in

large numbers.

It's as if we've passed into myth, much in the way that the brown bear, long extinct and wiped out by the 49er's, still graces the California State Flag, or in the way that Tennessee is a place name, originating from Tannassie, the first capitol of the Cherokee Nation...the Cherokee of course being long gone, with the final round of evictions being the *Trail of Tears* in 1838, ordered by Andrew Jackson, the dude on our 20 dollar bill.

At any rate, vestiges of DUMBO's former wilderness are still here. We keep to ourselves and blend in (except when we don't change to run to True Value). It is what it is and I have no anecdote except to explain the deeper reasons for why it is what it is. Many people are quite content with the status quo in DUMBO, because it suits them. So, for the time being, what's left of us walk to and from our studios and do our work, quietly missing our old friends and the days when we could walk down the street without being assaulted by a Range Rover, an obscenely long limo or some woman in six inch heels and her ass hanging out of a mini skirt, screeching at a bouncer.

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In Moby Dick, Melville likened our country to a whaling vessel (the oil industry of the 19th Century). Ahab, its maniacally ambitious and emotionally mutilated captain (outwardly manifested in a peg leg), leads his culturally diverse crew, (an Indian, African, Pacific Islander and wandering Jew), to abject destruction. Though the crew knew he was crazy, and he was leading them into the abyss, they could not summon their powers of resistance to turn the ship around.

In one of the final chapters, entitled "The Symphony", Captain Ahab, for one fleeting moment, experiences the clarity of introspection, which brings him to sobs. He admits to himself, and to Starbuck who witnesses his melt down, that "against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I do not so much as dare...". Starbuck seizes the opportunity to try to talk Ahab out of his bellicose pursuit of the great white whale and return home. But Ahab cannot bring himself to stop, and Starbuck resigns himself to despair. The next day, Moby splits the ship in half, and the crew goes down.

Tocqueville, a French magistrate and aristocrat, came to the United States in 1830 to observe our young democracy and report on his findings. Though his parents were conservative Bourbons and disapproved of the House of Orleans, Tocqueville aligned himself with the new King, Louise Phillip and his curiosity of how the United States, after its American Revolution, roughly 20 years before the French Revolution, managed its newly won freedom. *Democracy in America* was the outcome and became a book of great importance, which endures to this day.

Among the things Tocqueville had to say was that Americans confused freedom with equality and their right to private property. It was not so much about safe guarding their freedom of speech from tyranny as it was having what the other guy's got. He noted that there was a similar over shadowing self-involvement with the common man's interpretation of the freedom of the press. It was not so much about being free from censorship and therefore at liberty to question power and keep it in check as it was the right to own one's opinion. He commented that in general, Americans did not read widely and were not prone to developing the powers of critical thinking. They read what was expedient and familiar and believed it without much investigation. When called upon to defend their point of view, the issue for them was not that their opinion was well informed, but that it was theirs. Tocqueville concluded that this kind of complacency was dangerous and it would eventually lead to the emergence of a despot. And if the American people continued to be asleep at the wheel, their powers of resistance would atrophy, rendering them incapable of revolution and the collective will to toss the bum out, which in the end would lead to their demise.

Communitas is a Latin noun referring either to an unstructured community in which people are equal, or to the very spirit of community.

It is discussed at length by social anthropologist Victor Turner in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, in which he distinguishes between structure and communitas: the secular and the sacred. Based on his primary study of the Ndembu tribe in Africa and its rituals of passage, Turner explains the aspect of equality in communitas: that every social position has something sacred about it, and that it is acquired during shared rites of passage and the changing of positions between high and low rank. For example, one of the rituals a chief must go through before he can reach his higher position is to be exposed to the grievances of the entire tribe. Incarcerated in a hut for several days of fasting, he must endure humiliation, and even beatings from the common villagers, who take turns going into the hut to confront him eye to eye. It is not until he passes through this initiation of commiserating with his people that he can take his place as their leader.

The primary point that Turner makes about communitas is that it is a reflective form of community. There are open spaces of liminality, ritual, and catharsis woven into the society in which its citizens can release themselves from their everyday roles, ventilate their most raw emotions, and level the gap between high and low. The weak can confront the powerful. In this way, all citizens bond through the same sacred space, and the whole society remains in balance because a release valve is built into the paradigm. This idea of mutual accountability was not lost to the authors of the American Constitution, who included among our rights, the right to impeach. It is also interesting to note that among the many models that became sources in the drafting of our Constitution was that of the Iroquois Confederacy and the Tribal Council of Cherokee Nation.

Like the Ndembu, Native Americans practiced a communal manifestation of the sacred space of communitas. For instance, the Cherokee used to incorporate a festival into communal life in which commoners would dress up like demons/clowns, usually in extreme caricature, and heckle their chief and his family. They were called "boogers". Here again, the Cherokee incorporated the ventilation of liminal space into their culture through ritual, where high and low switched places, thereby embodying each other, or walking in each other's shoes, thus bonding the entire community and keeping all citizens beholden to all others and in check.

Outside of Athens Georgia, where I used to live when I taught at UGA, I had a studio on "Booger Hill Road". At the time I was researching the *Trail of Tears*, and came across this information. My friend Robert Lowery, from whom I rented my studio, quipped that it took a woman from California to tell him the real meaning of his address, while all this time we were wondering why someone would want to name a country road after snoot.

I use "looky loos" here in reference to Dave Hickey's piece *Romancing the Looky Loos*, published first in the New York Times Magazine and then in his collection of essays entitled *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*. In it he discusses the difference between "participants" and "spectators", and I quote..."spectators align themselves with authority. They have neither the time nor the inclination to make decisions. They just love the winning side.....while spectators must be lured, participants just appear..."

Hickey further summarized the difference by quoting his friend, Waylon Jennings: "When I play a little club, I'm playing songs for people I know. Up there in the lights in front of a stadium crowd, I'm just playin' Waylon for strangers". And then there's Waylon's song, *Are you sure Hank (Williams) done it this Way*, meaning Hank's rise to fame happened when Nashville was old school, when it was a culture of participants. He came up through the people; he was not pre-packaged, marketed and installed by the corporate music business.

In essence, participants embody communitas.