

There are no crows in Austin. The grackles have chased them away. They have stolen the scraps of food in their tiny claws and their long, pointed beaks. They have taken the place of the crows at the dumpsters and picnic tables and supermarkets. They have replaced the ominous flocks of crows lurking in the trees or perching on power lines. The grackles have taken their spot on the branches, on the telephone poles, chirping and chattering away, filling the sky with noise. This city is not my home. My home is seventeen hundred miles away where cornfields whisper in the wind, fresh snowfalls blanket the world in silence, and booms of thunder shake the pictures on the walls. My home is crow caws announcing the dawn and carrying the world into night and, despite my fear of them, they are what I miss most.

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The crow that I am most familiar with is the American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). This is the one whose noise I long to hear. But there are forty-something other species of crows known to us and twenty-something other species that only exist in the fossil record. The family *Corvidae* contains crows, ravens, rooks, jackdaws, magpies, treepies, choughs, and nutcrackers, a group that's often called the "crow family." But the group of *true* crows (genus *Corvus*), the group I refer to when I use 'crow,' consists only of ravens, crows, jackdaws, and rooks. You call a group of rooks a *parliament*, a group of jackdaws a *clattering*. You call a group of crows a *murder*, a group of ravens an *unkindness*.

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Some say a crow saved Saint Benedict of Nursia, said to be the father of the European monastic tradition. Benedict and the crow had formed a kind of relationship. Each night, the crow would arrive at dinnertime, like clockwork, and Benedict would feed it bread. One

night, Benedict's bread had been poisoned. Some say the crow snatched the piece of poisoned bread of its own volition, somehow able to detect the poison, and flew far away to discard it, later returning for his usual piece of bread. Others say Benedict grew wise to the plot and told the crow to take the poisoned bread far away. Benedict lived and his religious traditions survived, with the crow to thank. They also appear in Hinduism, Judaism, Islam. They are integral to Japanese, Greek, Korean, Celtic, American Indian mythology.

Depending on where you ask, the crow is a clever trickster or a wise messenger or a devourer of the dead or a ferryman for lost souls. In Australia, among the Aboriginals, the crow brought man fire. In Africa, crows are seen as guides, messengers, and protector spirits, the bringers of good news and fortune. In Norse mythology, Odin's ravens Huginn and Muninn feed him information from all over the world while his two wolves, Geri and Freki, served as his hunters and defenders.

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Call-and-response as a musical pattern started in Africa though it was used in other settings long before its use in music. Put simply, it is a back-and-forth exchange that usually takes place between a single leader and the chorus. The call-and-response pattern is also often found in African American churches as the congregation shouts back its "Amen!" and its "Yes Lord!" and its "Praise Jesus!" Crows and ravens use call-and-response too. A researcher by the name of Daniel Stahler discovered that ravens in the Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding areas had formed a sort of symbiotic relationship with the wolves present. The ravens would find a fresh kill and send out their throaty cry to alert the wolves to the area so that they could tear open the flesh and devour the animal's innards. The wolves and ravens would eat together, the wolves scaring others away from

their feast. Eagles were the most common intruder, one the crows tried to chase away. The eagles were too powerful. The crows had no way to fight them off forever.

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Jim Crow laws were enacted in the last quarter of the 19th century for the whites to further separate themselves from the Negro. They were a successor to the Black Codes that came to an official end in 1866, though they were around long after that. However, the term "Jim Crow" did not make a legitimate appearance until 1904 when it appeared in the Dictionary of American English and the term "Jim Crow" itself came into existence in the first third of the 19th century when a comedian by the name of Thomas Dartmouth Rice/T.D. Rice performed a song and dance, "Jump Jim Crow," in blackface. This performance led to the rise of minstrel shows. The inspiration for the song was said to have been the dance of a crippled African slave—origins unknown, some say Cincinnati, some say St. Louis—whose name was Jim Cuff or Jim Crow. But this is legend. Perhaps Jim Crow refers to the fact that blacks were called, pejoratively, crows in the mid-1700s. 'Crow' is also a nickname for the crowbar, which can also be called a 'Jimmy,' commonly used in burglaries and car thefts.

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No known animal has mastered the use of hooked tools except for the New Caledonian crow. This particular species of crow has performed many surprisingly complex tasks using tools with an intelligence and adaptability surpassing that of primates. But their intelligence goes beyond the use and modification of tools. They have also been observed using humans to get their food. They will wait for a red light at an intersection and place particularly tough nuts in front of the cars to be cracked open. The crows then wait at the

crosswalk like pedestrians, moving only when the walk sign is lit to collect the available seeds. They have adapted to us, not with us.

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There is a scene in Disney's *Dumbo* where a group of five crows mock Dumbo and his ears and, in this scene, all of the crows are dressed and speak in an exaggerated stereotype of Southern antebellum blacks. The crows refer to each other as 'brother,' 'th' sounds are turned into 'd' sounds. "What's cookin' 'round here, what's the good news," the lead crow says. "Well hush my beak," he exclaims. This lead crow's name is Jim Crow, though this name is hidden, found only in the movie's script. The crows burst into song in a manner reminiscent of the black vaudeville tradition and, later in the scene, sing scat. Their most repeated lyric throughout the scene is, "But I been done seen 'bout everything / when I see a elephant fly" The rat is referred to as "Reverend Rodent" who tells Jim Crow to "fly up a tree where you belong."

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Some of the lyrics of "Jump Jim Crow" are as follows:

*Come, listen all you gals and boys, Ise just from Tuckyhoe;  
I'm goin, to sing a little song, My name's Jim Crow.*

*CHORUS [after every verse]  
Weel about and turn about and do jis so,  
Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.*

*And den I go to Orleans, An, feel so full of flight;  
Dey put me in de Calaboose, An, keep me dere all night.*

*And oder day I hit a man, De man was mighty fat  
I hit so hard I nockt him in To an old cockt hat.*

There were other verses written for the song. Some were more outright in their mockery and appropriation of blackness. But there were some that were quite the opposite, such as

this abolition-driven verse from 1832, written and performed by T.D. Rice himself, perhaps in an attempt to express the crowd's fears of the agitated Negro hunger for freedom or, perhaps, to lure in blacks with empty promises of brotherhood.

*Should dey get to fighting,  
Perhaps de blacks will rise,  
For deir wish for freedom,  
Is shining in deir eyes.*

*And if de blacks should get free,  
I guess dey'll see some bigger,  
An I shall consider it,  
A bold stroke for de nigger.*

*I'm for freedom,  
An for Union altogether,  
Although I'm a black man,  
De white is call'd my broder.*

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During her hunt to catalog Southern folklore, Zora Neale Hurston stumbled across the Crow Dance, a song she heard in Jacksonville, Florida. She describes it before performing it, saying, "...the crow in some ways seems to be sacred in Africa. But what they're talking about is what we know in the United States as the buzzard." Both the buzzard and crow are carrion birds, both consort together, and in The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, it is said, "Buzzards are viewed as being lazy and opportunistic...Because of his overall undesirability, Buzzard tends to be viewed as an asocial entity unwelcome in good company."

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George Moran and Charles Mack were two of the most popular blackface performers in the 1920s and 1930s. Their act was known as "Two Black Crows" or "The Black Crows." The two characters assumed two of the most typical minstrel identities, with Mack playing a

covetous straight man while Moran was a slow, lazy buffoon. They were heard on the radio, seen on Broadway, starred in films. Here's one of their jokes:

**MACK:** Wish I had an ice-cold watermelon.

**MORAN:** Oh lawdy. Me too.

**MACK:** Wish I had a thousand ice-cold watermelons.

**MORAN:** Glory be. I bet if you had a thousand ice-cold watermelons, you'd give me one.

**MACK:** No, no siree! If you are too lazy to wish for your own watermelons, you ain't gonna get none of mine.

George Moran and Charles Mack appeared in many vaudeville acts with the comedian W.C. Fields, most notably in Ziegfield's Follies in 1920. Another prominent minstrel duo, Bert Williams and George Walker, also appeared in Ziegfield's Follies. Williams and Walker's act was known as "Two Real Coons" and, though they were black, they would use burnt cork to darken their skin further for the delight of their audiences. In 1911, Walker died of syphilis, the disease ravaging his body and mind, and was buried in his Midwestern hometown, Lawrence, Kansas. After Walker's death, Williams performed in a later iteration of Ziegfield's Follies in a bird suit with rear plumage and legs similar to that of a rooster or a crow.

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***Sept. 13, 1933: The New York Amsterdam News, "Blue Eagle and Jim-Crow," Kelly Miller***

"From the earliest times the eagle has been regarded as a noble bird—vigorous of wing, strong of beak and talons, piercing of eye and dauntless of courage. The eagle has been adopted as the symbol of many a state. The Roman eagle symbolized the courage and valor of that mighty empire. This same bird symbolizes the freedom of

the American spirit and is stamped upon our Almighty Dollar...Today we have jim-crow schools, jim-crow churches, jim-crow cars, jim-crow sections of the city, and, in a word, jim-crowism stamps every feature of life where the two races operate separately...Jim-crow is a ghastly, gaunt, ungainly bird, which befouls the aims and ideals of the American eagle. His spirit is cowardly; his croak is gruesome. Jim-crow and the eagle are mortal enemies. They cannot thrive in the same atmosphere...the NRA [National Recovery Administration] must be operated without regard to race, creed, or color...Jim-crow stands defiantly athwart the Blue Eagle's path and stubbornly disputes the right of way. Blue Eagle must triumph or jim-crow must give way or be forced out of the way."

Forgotten in Miller's article is the fourth option, the one that was chosen: a partnership between Blue Eagle and Jim Crow. The two birds joined together to strengthen each other. As part of the deal, Jim Crow began working behind the scenes while Blue Eagle used its image of honor and valor to mask its predatory instincts and its partnership with its darker cousin.

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Michelle Alexander, author of the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* argues that the American prison system has been designed as a system of social control applied disproportionately to African Americans in ways that mirror or even surpass the restrictions placed on blacks during Jim Crow and the days of segregation. She writes, "In some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men. And in major cities wracked by the drug war, as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives." She

struggled for some time to accept the idea of the prison system as social control and talks about her growing frustrations with the ACLU inattention to prison reform before returning to her point. She writes, "Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity...are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it."

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Crow hunting season in Iowa occurs from October 15th to November 30th and again from January 14th to March 31st. There is no limit how many you can kill. In Texas, crows "...may be controlled without a federal or state depredation permit when found committing or about to commit depredations on ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or when concentrated in numbers and in a manner that constitutes a health hazard or other nuisance." This is true in most states; crows that 'cause problems' can be killed with impunity. Crows are not protected, not from anyone who considers them a nuisance or a threat.

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Jordan Davis was killed for being a nuisance on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012. Michael Dunn was angered by loud music coming from Davis' vehicle and claimed that Davis made him fear for his life, that the young boy brandished a shotgun from inside the vehicle, and this is what made Dunn fire on him. No gun was ever found. Since long before the case, I've turned my music down when I am in a nice (white) neighborhood, when I am near police, when there is any chance that I might be seen as a nuisance. There was justice for Jordan Davis,



for this boy with my name. Dunn was sentenced to life without parole. But there has been no justice for so many others, killed because they were considered, however loosely, a nuisance or a threat.

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I lower the volume of my headphones to listen for footsteps from the black men I just passed and I walk a little faster. I cross the street, away from them, and my muscles loosen. When I realize what I am doing, what my body is doing, I am filled with shame, anger, self-loathing. I have fallen for the lie we've been sold that blackness means danger. I have noticed women clutch their purse as I walk past them. I have noticed men walk a little faster when I am around them at night. It always frustrates me. Yet, here I am doing the same thing. Here I am, quickening my step past black men, away from men in jeans, jerseys, hooded sweatshirts, Nike sneakers, away from men that look like me.

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The Tuskegee Institute's 1959 Lynch Report reported 4,733 deaths by lynching between 1882 and 1959. I'm certain this number has increased in the past fifty-five years, though there are few statistics on deaths by lynching over the last half of the century. But on August 29<sup>th</sup> of this year, a teenager by the name of Lennon Lacy was found hanging from a swing set in Bladenboro, North Carolina. His death was ruled a suicide despite the presence of contusions on his head, a pair of shoes, a couple sizes too small, on his feet that his parents had never seen before, and the complete absence of mental illness in Lacy's background. There was little mention of Bladenboro's long history of racial tension nor of the abuses, insults, and jeers Lacy had already received from residents of the town because of his relationship with an older white woman. Days after his death, his grave was defiled.

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Crows are notoriously difficult to scare off. Scarecrows, contrary to their name, have never been that effective. Using the bodies of dead crows, however, has proved quite effective. Some farmers would hang them from trees. One farmer, William Oles of Colebrook, was written about in the October 28, 1911 issue of *The Chicago Defender*, because of how he dealt with his crow problem. *"William Oles...has a large field of corn which has been ravaged for months by crows...he came upon this idea: He would soak some of the corn in whisky and place it in the corn patch...The next morning...He found eight large crows staggering around the field and simulating the human voice as closely as nature would permit. He says he heard one of the crows singing."* Then Oles put the crows in cages, lectured them on the wrongs of their behavior, executed them, and left their bodies to rot in the fields.

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Michael Brown was shot dead and left on the ground for four and a half hours. The shooter was Darren Wilson, a police officer in a town fifteen minutes from my grandmother's house, a town. Brown was shot dead and the details are unclear. It is unclear whether Brown assaulted Wilson and made him fear for his life enough to fire on the teenager instead of employing other non-lethal methods. It is known, from Wilson's Grand Jury testimony, that he likened Brown to the wrestler Hulk Hogan, in terms of his strength, that he likened Brown to a demon. It is known that Wilson states that he shot "it," referring to Brown, now considered a non-person by Wilson. On the night the grand jury was to decide whether or not to indict Wilson, Brown's family asked protesters for four and a half minutes of silence—an echo of the four and a half hours his body lay in the street, unacknowledged by the police—after the verdict was announced, out of respect. Wilson was

not indicted and, in some places, silence was given. In most places, noise prevailed. Years of black boys being shot and their killers escaping unscathed, years of hearing the media-spun lie that black violence was an epidemic sweeping our nation, years of pain and loss and heartbreak became too much for some to bear and anger filled the skies.

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What is there to say about these deaths? About Trayvon Martin, whose death I've run out of words for. About Eric Garner, killed by an illegal chokehold for selling cigarettes while his killers go unpunished. About Victor White III, who managed to, after being searched and handcuffed, produce a pistol that was allegedly behind his back the whole time and, through moves a contortionist would envy, put the gun against the front of his chest and shot himself dead. What is there to say?

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All our crows are dying. The deaths come under different names. The deaths present with different causes: suicide, murder, addiction, police brutality. Over half a million crows sit, caged, unheard, unseen, and they are dying one day at a time. Those that are free are hunted, shot down, shot on the street, shot on their land. They are not protected, not by any treaty, not by any act. All our crows are dying.

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I am envious of crows and of their flight. I fly in some of my dreams. Like the one in which I am a crow cutting through the air, one among hundreds of thousands unchained, unburdened. Like the one in which I am a raven sitting on a rock in the desert enjoying the stillness, the peace of it all, unrestricted by civilization and its systems, its rules. In these dreams, I am filled with joy. I hope to be one of them someday later, some life later. I hope

to be a creature of flight so that I can leave the earth beneath my feet, the earth that my ancestors were forced onto, the earth filled with their sweat and blood, the earth that holds the bodies of all of those we have lost.

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Near the second house I lived in, the one that holds my memories of blood and bruises, the one my father lives in alone now, there is a trail that winds and cuts for miles through West Des Moines and Des Moines, Iowa. I walked this trail often to escape my father's abuses and the beatings from my brother. I had three favorite spots on the trail where I could relax and let my thoughts wander. The third only became a favorite after I found the crows. A field next to the trail had been cleared for upcoming development and all that remained of its original form was a lone tree stump. As I neared the newly cleared field, I heard the heavy flapping of wings and a constant stream of caws. There were hundreds all flying in and settling on nearby branches of nearby trees, looking like black leaves. And then, as if someone pressed a mute button on the scene, they fell silent. One crow hopped down from his perch and made his way to the middle of the field, disappearing behind the stump. Several minutes passed in silence. And then, by some unknown signal, the field erupted with caws and the crows filled the sky and flew away. I walked to the center of the clearing to see what they had gathered around: a young crow, wings shattered, neck broken, in a crumpled heap.