The Blind-spots of Chthonic Ignorance and Projective Imaginaries: Generating Prehistory in the Dark Matter Spaces of the Caverns and Dark Energy Patterns of the Past

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Prehistory is an industry in the Dordogne, Ardèche, and in the Pyrenées in Southern France and Northern Spain where the caves are everywhere, sealed, forgotten, found, revealed, or gaping open in the sandstone layers of the landscape. Once the object of skepticism and doubt, the cave paintings now stand as distinctive evidence of the long history of occupation in the region, which was beyond the reach of the ice sheets in the last glacial maximum, which lasted until about 19,000 years ago. The area provided, in spite of temperature swings and volatile climatic conditions, a relatively temperate zone into which migrated the mega-fauna of the period—bison, woolly mammoths, reindeer, other animals and their predators—and the human groups who depended on these fauna, as well as ancient flora, for food.

The known and identified remains of this human-animal-ecological system are plentiful, and increasingly codified by paleoanthropologists and archaeologists, whose systems of dating, sorting, and classifying nuance the era of the Paleolithic into cultural segments based on evidence of increased skill at tool making and design, among other things. The history stretches now well past the million-year mark, as the recognition that bipedal hominins sharpened rocks with other rocks justifies the claims to species distinction—along with their DNA, cranial shapes, and traces of social organization.

Though surely not the only places occupied by various branches of *homo* over the last million years, the caves, ledges, and sites in the region are, however, among the most conspicuously preserved and currently available ones on which to construct the various discourses of prehistory. Other sites must exist, and the markers that dot the region on any map that charts known evidence dating back across the millennia are only indicating
what has survived and been noted through the chance combinations of geology and circumstance. Many more caves may someday yield their hidden drawings, scratchings, marks, and signs. But even if and when they do, the partial nature of the evidence of this remote past will remain partial, and the physical indications will remain devoid of the cultural contexts on which their understanding depends. Unless future archaeologists discover some way to recover sound and performance, activity and experience, the muteness of the past will keep its stories closed to examination. The ignorance that emerges from the study of the past has a specific shape, and the more the remains are analyzed, organized, and presented, the more particular the form of ignorance of the deep past becomes. Not what is known, but what is unknowable, fashions an absorptive aporia in every instance of evidence. Like dark matter in the universe it comprises most of the historical past, as with dark energy, we can apprehend the effects of actions in this unknown past, but not observe its behaviors directly.

The human occupants whose traces remain in the drawings on cave walls were part of later developments than the early *homo erectus* who first drifted into modern day Europe and Britain, where they left their now-fossilized footprints in the sand. The *homo sapiens* existing in the two hundred thousand or so years before the present seem to have had the same cognitive capacities, social skills, family life, and so on that we do. Or so the story goes, in part. But whether those early pre-humans all died out or returned the way they came or were absorbed into later populations is not completely clear. The scope, scale, and other specifically configured details of ignorance shift along the parallax lines of evidence and speculation. The observation does not debunk science, rather, attempts to articulate what lies outside it in more precise terms than a generalization about incompleteness. The emerging contours of prehistory, within the presentation and analysis of remains, provides a faint but specific outline of our ignorance.
Everything about the images in the caves is up for debate: age, purpose, meaning, authorship. The caves were dark, damp, and inhospitable, and only used as shelter at their openings, where there is evidence of hearth and family group activity. But none of these are spontaneous drawings made by someone picking up a charred stick and marking on the wall. The paintings are done with carefully prepared mineral pigments, collected, ground, mixed with other matter: sometimes grease, water, spit, or blood. Black, made from manganese, is always the first color used, then red, from ochre or haematite, and limonite or ochres for yellows and brown. The minerals are found in the environment, often in the caves, and processed for use. The surfaces are sometimes smoothed or otherwise prepared, and often picked for the suggestive shapes in the walls and ceilings. The range of techniques is considerable as are styles, skills, and approaches to placement and composition. In some cases, the drawings are only lines scratched in the rock, in others, contours appear and masses of color. Every detail has been inventoried, every mark, every curve of cave wall and possible fragment of line or shadow. Experts, authorities, ponder the evidence, but they are focused on understanding prehistory, not with the staging of prehistory for consumption. That is the curator’s job, the work of the guides and exhibit preparators.

In the region prehistory is a tourist industry, and its production requires a careful negotiation between familiarizing and exoticizing that past. The guides, for instance, always use the plural first or second person pronoun, “we” or “you” as do the exhibitions and museum literature. The “we” takes in an undifferentiated collective of historical categories that creates a single mass of universal contemporary humanity unified by abilities for abstract thought, representation, and other distinctive features of “superior” evolutionary accomplishment.

The presentation of the tools is an art in itself, as is the discourse of prehistory, a staging of theory around scraps of evidence meant to justify our current self-construction through a version of a past that suits present perception. That’s just the stuff of history-
making, after all, and the continual shifting figure we read in that uncertain evidentiary ground is endemic to all but the most positivist interpretations of the remains of the past. What can be extrapolated from those fragments of bone, the piles of flint tools, the piles of beads, or other hard objects fashioned from minerals for use at one time and yet managing to last, literally, for ages?

The past has changed dramatically in the last two centuries. The standard myth is that up until the 19th century evidence of any human history that exceeded the chronologies of the Bible was heretical and thus suppressed. But when we rethink this, we might find another, simpler explanation—that that which cannot be conceived cannot be known. No concept of prehistory existed into which the evidence could be understood. Visitors were in and out of the grotto of Niaux for centuries. The images it holds that were made in the late Paleolithic had come in front of the eyes of many human beings. But without a context in which to know what they were and how to see them, they were merely graffiti on a wall to which new lines and personal traces could be and were added. The lesson of the blind spot is useful. The foundations of our own understanding are similarly circumscribed, just within a different set of assumptions and limits.

Every site (Lascaux, Rouffignac, Font de Gaume, Combarelles, L’Abri Cap Blanc, Chauvet, Niaux, Altamira, the Cuevas del Castillo and Las Monedas, to list some of the more prominent) and museum (at Les Eyzies, Lascaux, Chauvet, Altamira, and Burgos) contains distinctive images and artifacts, all worked and produced in different ways. Each guide offers a particular gloss and commentary, uses a distinct tone of voice and selective vocabulary. Every museum presents a specific version of the refracted tale. The lines of contradiction and paradox abound, the blindness at the center of the work is so profound it absorbs knowledge like the intellectual dark matter that it is, a void into which insight disappears. We see only that tiny percentage of the prehistoric universe that conforms to descriptive expectation.
The performative staging of prehistory is subtle, complex, appearing as it does within the frameworks of the science of paleoanthropology. Now fully accessorized by imaging and dating techniques, the stuff of carbon-14 and radio isotopes, of the methods and equipment of material science, the pure labs and pristinely preserved environments, the field is radically different than in its early days of 19th century pick-axes, booted men with pipes in hand and jaw, and boxes for hauling heaps of artifacts to the treasure houses of rich collectors, patrons, or state institutions far from their sites. The very notion of a site was absent from those scenes, and the actions of removal so brutal and so without documentation that much is permanently lost from places discovered or visited until a few years ago.

Knowledge without context has no traction. The mythic versions of the tale are repeated by guides and interpretative panels alike, reinforcing the superiority of modern scientific methods over those of earlier belief systems—or even the techniques of prior anthropologists—including those in which prehistory was, again, purported to be heresy. The web of science that surrounds the prehistory industry has its own mythologies, of course, and current authority resides in digital imaging, virtual reconstruction, micro-analysis of remains—all of which pretends to empirical precision. Our current frameworks of belief have their own orthodoxies, and empirical methods have their own uncertainties and intellectual clumsiness. The cases make the argument better than generalizations, however, so on to the evidence and the observation that arises from it.

The Musée Nationale de Préhistoire in Les Eyzies is built into the rock, a structure on a structure that incorporates generations of built bits and pieces. Typically European in its fine preservation of fragments, showcasing authenticity through frames of glass and chrome, the well-designed entry holds its bauble-gift-shop tucked into a small dark corner just to the left of the entrance, discretely out of sight. Through the entry turnstile, the curve of glass echoes the curve of the sandstone cliff rising above, the carved remains of an ancient sea bed, shaped by the waters that moved across the wide
delta plain that is now Western France in the eras of the earth’s formation. The scales of these prehistories are enormous, the age of the earth measured in billions, the surface formations in millions. The first display in the museum is a huge timeline, showing the discrete stages of human evolution as steps in an upward ascent, each distinct from the other and named by evidence and species, from Australopithecus to homo sapiens sapiens, each with its dates of origin and duration. In this presentation, we are the pinnacle, the top, our upright posture, secure bipedalism, and cranial/cognitive advantages all clear markings of advance. Among the French, at least, the notion of Neanderthal cross-breeding is still suspect, denied, and the categories of distinction, us and them, kept markedly clear, or so our guide insists. What threat to the genetic purity of contemporary culture requires this policing of an ancient line, known to be blurred, porous, and transgressed? The upward steps of the progressive narrative are coded as inevitable and, oddly, terminal, as if the summa had been reached, achieved, and will not be superceded. We are done, cooked as a species, finished and complete in our capacities, now able to control our lives, the natural environment, fulfill all needs and create all desires through the transformative capacity of technologies that fashion matter into form for all of our requirements. Unthinking, we think we are able to encompass our qualities and see them fully, not seeing what we cannot and, by virtue of that limit, do not. In this regard we are no different from those 17th century spelunkers, casually adding their names to the graffittied walls, oblivious to the timeframes within which the earlier images had come to be present and how their shapes and marks communicated something no naming system had yet been invented to codify, at least, not in the flourish of signatures, brand names, self-identity symbols. No different, because we are equally oblivious to the blindspots of our methods, equally hubristic in our assumptions of intellectual completeness, as if only the bits of evidence were partial, not our methods of understanding them inadequate and undeveloped.
Just behind the great wall of evolution, with its progress narrative, is a replica of Lucy, the three million year old long-armed small-statured figure. Artfully done, the display holds the bones of her skeleton in glass, articulating them in such a way as to make clear the significant differences between her and us even while the physical features establish continuity. Lucy is an *Australopithecus*, the hominid ape, habitually bipedal but still small-skulled and small-brained, a female of a species on the way to contemporary humankind. The retrospective gaze produces forward-oriented teleology. The evidence is well-presented, clean and clear, the space of the body implied, not indicated, and no faked supplements are added, just the facsimile bone bits and their arrangement. No imaginative spectacle is fulfilled as a literal reconstruction—no hair, no skin, no face, no expression. We see just what we have as remains, presented as evidence and as evidence of an objective, scientific gaze unsoftened by concessions to speculation. These are hominins, those creatures that bridge the gap between chimpanzees and the development of our human species, as if there were a “gap” before the “bridge” had existed.

On the floor above, in spaces that continue the particular elegance of architecture that serves the French patrimony, the emphasis on preserved and carefully isolated fragments of ruins and remains continues. In cool, clear, rational glass and metal frameworks, we encounter case after case of flints and tools, axe heads and arrowheads, from the crudest first implements to carvings in silicon rendered thin as glass. The march from less refined to greater, from primitive to highly skilled, is ranged with resolute precision in the long cases flanking the space, while those that occupy the central positions contain the jewels of the collection, that handful of artifacts that command amazement. Tools, mobile art, the environment, the hunt, burial sites, and human beings are the themes by which the museum organizes its presentations and segments Paleolithic life into separate strands of activity.
The museum is filled with artifacts, case after case of tools beginning with the earliest known hand-held and minimally altered rocks. Among the crudest, their identity as made things is so elusive that they might easily pass for natural objects. How old? How fashioned? Some recent discoveries in Africa have dated the making of tools to more than three million years ago, long before *homo sapiens* had emerged, thus raising questions about who made those artifacts and how, and whether they were the work of as yet unidentified species or of cousins in the complex family. A tiny fingerbone in a single cave in Siberia, the mere tip of a thing, sets the DNA machines in action, and a new subspecies, the Denisovans, becomes a named category, splitting the historical reality again. Neanderthal bones, yielding their genetic information, sequenced and analyzed, track the lineage of shifts and changes, modifications in genetic code. Who are we? The question dogs each discovery. How unique and unique how? But in the Dordogne the tools go back slightly more than a million years, to the period of assumed earliest migrations into the region. The waves of human migration began with Neanderthals, the *homo heidelbergensis*, who arrived only 300,000 years ago more or less. The museum shows them in full reconstruction, a man and a child, fair complected, hair reddish hued on head and arms. The shaggy skin covering serves the cause of modesty, but also, believability. We can imagine the rough hide as appropriate dress for our Neanderthal kin or non-kin, though the full-scale replica of another early ancestor, slim, dark-skinned, with rough hair and conspicuous teeth, wears a small strip of hide across his loins in an improbable and anachronistic gesture. The primitive must not appear too stark, too present, too frontally displayed in the provincial museum, though in the Spanish town of Burgos no such constraints were in play. Their hominid creatures were gendered, their genitalia as visible as any other upright ape’s, and the artfully modeled statues met our gaze with full front honesty, expressions of awareness shaped into their features.

Case after case of knapped rocks, meant for the hand, contrast with jewel-case velvet backing on which the deadly instruments repose. Just edges at first, sharpened at
one end of the rock. Then, gradually, the biface appears, an artfully carved instrument, its points thin and sharp, custom fashioned for each task, and its symmetries so perfected that the model of its form imprints repeatedly. The achievement demonstrates a mode of knowing by seeing, by feel, by touch, by the intricate handling of one material in relation to another. The spearheads and arrowheads are shaftless, their organic parts gone, but the thousands of remaining objects, some thin enough for light to shine through, others massive, threatening, authoritative in their form and expression, lie in states of limbo, suspended from activity. In terms of their use, these are items of incredible value, and the skills of making outstrip modern capacities. How long would it take to learn to make these items, make them well enough to survive, to use them accurately and appropriately in order to meet the basic challenge of just eating every day? That knowledge, use knowledge, is one kind of dark energy in the equation, one aspect of the force field of what is missing, unlearned, and lost that was essential to survival. It flows in and among the massive continents of the unknowable past, dark matter that absorbs, ignorance at a scale that expands exponentially to fill all the interstices of the known. Between one carefully chipped axe face and another, along the lines of the arrow and spear launchers, their backward hooks carved with animal forms, lie deep crevasses of always and ever to be missing information. Dark matter ignorance is not the same as missing evidence, gaps in the record. The darkness is produced by the inability to conjure an unimaginable conception, or imagine analysis and explanation otherwise. Dark matter is not just the missing stuff, but the stuff that can’t be grasped within our frameworks of knowing the past, that are other to our historical imaginings. Dark energy is the absence of the systems of activity, transaction, networks of exchange and value production within the complex social imaginary of that prehistoric culture. If dark matter is the stuff we can’t know within our current frameworks of intellection, then dark energy is comprised of the cultural forces that escape our conceptual understanding.
The animals depicted in the handful of carved objects are reindeer, bison, aurochs—familiars in the population of fauna among whom these people lived. The sophistication of the technology surpasses belief, as the capacity for making emerges from the hominid activities and becomes culturally organized behavior. The semiosis of it, of the organizational structuring of making, has no parallel in our own world, with its conventions of made-ness, except, perhaps, at that limit of knowledge in the macro and micro scales where we see the fraying edge of what we know in the un-imaged course towards the still ungraspable as grounds for production, technique. But in these cases the sheer physicality of expression makes the process of transformation palpable. But the way the flint points are laid in their cases presupposes a natural order to their evolution, as if some linear algebra of sequence were at work in the groups and clusters of humans who knew what they knew about making those hard points. But they did not have the overview, the organizational classification system laid out, instead, were inside of the creating of it from the systematic daily business of survival that now seems an unavoidable, absolute, order present in their things. The order is ours, the making theirs, and the two sides of that distinction cannot be reconciled. We are not just discovering their remains, seeing the sequence of those making events, but making an event of the finding, shaped by our own desire to imagine some order in it. What is remarkable is that the knowing in the making existed without such a supra-imposition, without the rules, the system, the classification, except in the minds, collective and individual, that rendered the physical objects with such skill, passed knowledge through observation and imitation. Our meta-system of display, with its organization and presentational rhetoric, gives the impression that such an overview would have been implicit, even explicit, in the cognitive capacities of our ancestors. But no meta-knowledge existed, no schemes, no instructive guides, or rule sets beyond the success of skill in its immediacy. Knowledge, unmediated except by direct transfer, is now rendered as a mediated/mediating system of order. The flints and bifaces are all ranged and arranged in conformity with that fiction.
As if ancient humans were fulfilling orders for types of tools already firmly in mind at the
time of making, rather than bringing the types into being.

The treasures in the Musée in Les Eyzies include a carved reindeer horn in the
shape of a bison turning its head to lick its body. The shape was determined by the horn,
but the solution is imaginative design, and the details of tongue, lips, eyes, fairly speak of
intimacy, knowledge of the beast, and the pleasure of making. Among the carved
arrowheads and spear throwers the appearance of this thing, a sculpture the size of the
palm of my hand, is completely remarkable. The brilliant cousin to a whole host of
utilitarian objects, its fine lines and grace are so striking it appears as if made recently, its
idea and its execution without any distance from the present. Clearly, the explanation
follows, we did not make this when were a child version of ourselves, but when we are
who we are now, developed and evolved. The design of an idea, in an idea, surpasses all
other skills we have witnessed in terms of conception as well as execution.

The evolutionary teleology is a double-bind, since it requires that we be able to
identify with that early cultural condition, and also note our distance from it. Who among
us, now, has the skill to conceive and execute such a work? And yet, we cannot imagine
organizing ourselves, bringing down a reindeer, slaughtering, butchering, carving the
warm flesh, eating it partly cooked, raw, chewing the skins, scraping the gut, fashioning
shelter and cover from the skins, and all in a situation where hygiene and medicine and
basic amenities are absent, where women manage, somehow, the difficult task of
childbirth without benefit of sanitation, where our distinction from the other fauna is only
that we are the ones who speak and have learned how to throw, to propel our tools of
predation through the air so that we become competitive even with the lions, whose skill
and speed and ability to leap on the backs of their prey, break their necks with their jaws
and turn them to the ground, are all formidable and clearly superior in effectiveness to
our own, which must be aided with prophylactic devices. Invention is a form of
compensation for inadequacy, a way to compete that leapfrogs us over our shortcomings to succeed.

Perhaps the most striking feature of prehistory is this realization that we lived among mega fauna, on whose existence we depended, and whose prowess in many cases exceeded our own. The distance from those circumstances is striking, as is the concurrent mythology that emerges with it, that the conditions of the natural world are independent of (or, in an alternate mythology, dependent on) our abilities to bring them under our control. But we are of that world, not in relation to it, and staging ourselves as other is part of the discourse of prehistory that inscribes inevitability into our retelling of the past, as if we were not animals, as if there were a them and an us rather than a continuum of differences.

After the tools, their elegant symmetries displayed, and after the carved bison and the handles of the throwers, also carved in materials hard enough to endure fifteen or more millennia, we are presented with a case with a facsimile of a burial, accompanied by a mass of drilled beads, tiny, perfect, skillfully made. The labor involved is enormous, and, again, beyond the skill levels of our time except in circumstances of apprenticeship and considerable training. We are caught once more in a contradictory perception, meant to see the relative primitiveness of the artifacts while wrestling with our own inability to produce them. We have only the most preliminary notion of what would be involved in learning to make such things.

What purpose did these effigies serve? Why make them? The sheer delight of hand work, the ease and grace of bringing something into being, the fulfillment of a basic drive to see representation emerge from or be imposed on materials? The questions of “why” constellate the darkness of knowledge in this field, a set of impossible to answer presumptions in the unknowable, the dark matter that swallows the evidence, the dark matter of forms we can no longer imagine or grasp. Other gems of prehistory are present, objects elaborately made in accord with our current conventions of realism, their
distinctive features re-rendered. We don’t use smell, touch, sound, or other sensations as part of the encounter with the prehistoric, instead, sight locks the past into a set of views meant to serve the full purpose of informing us of what the remains are, or are like. The terms of resemblance are supposedly out of the equation, as the facsimiles are meant to be accurate, not approximate, and to leave no distance between themselves and their originals. Cast or laser cut, painted and distressed, the “real” objects and the facsimiles cannot be told apart, not by the eye and at this distance. But hand and body, heft and feel, shape, texture, weight and dynamic properties were essential to these objects, to imaging them as well as making and using them.

The real tales are messy, not neat, but the exquisite presentation of fragments, each carefully lit, placed, respected, burnished in the light of a deep antiquity, is meant to sustain the contradiction of distance and continuity, to assure us that the CroMagnon human beings of the Upper Paleolithic were still far from modern, even if their intellectual and physical traits were almost completely the same as ours. The dodge continues, with the presentation of another burial site and its beads, some early jewelry. But like fragments of pottery taken from a recent earthquake site, their battered condition of preservation belies their original state. Distance is marked by damage, a kind of insurance against pollution of the present by the past. The dark matter of the infernal world threatens, in spite of the ritual and fetishized preservation of these remains. The “stuff” has potency. Treasures, yes, but ones whose will to connection has to be managed, controlled, lest the upright ape find too much of itself in the glass.

Still in the museum at Les Eyzies, the beautiful modern building segues into the late Renaissance structure, once home to a noble local lord, who put added its formal structures, terrace, windows, roofline directly into the cliff. The architectural extrusion, noticeably square and structured, stands in sharp relief to the organic curve of that cliff, bellying out above. Nature and culture, prehistory and the intermediate present, joined but not confused, linked but not the same. The exquisite integration of one phase of
construction with another puts the physical, textural, aesthetic properties of each into relief as an effect of the well-designed contrasts, calling each bit of masonry or cliff face to attention within a whole integrated by that pathway through the museum narrative.

But the chthonic dark matter of intellection is a condition of ignorance concealed in the surface of coherence. All that is thought is partial, explaining itself, but not explaining the beingness of that world, its history, or its specificities. How to come to terms with that? The dimensions of the chthonic are infinite, as the particularities of beingness are inexhaustible through description or articulation. This is no more true in the studies of prehistory than in the workings of science, but the fashioning of prehistory from the exhumed remains conjures the chthonic into play, the infernal ranges of a lurking ignorance that is different from the quantum spaces of unaccounted for dark matter and energy in the realms of physics or theoretical mathematics. In the writing of prehistory as a presentation narrative, the gaps so far exceed the points of evidence that the distance between one scrap of bone and another expands in multiple dimensions, like radiance in the full multiplicity of dimensions that arrays around any object, points of view and interrogation from which it can be apprehended. Yet, like the flints ranged in the cases, the pieces are ordered in a sequence that stands in for knowledge, as if all the many vortices of non-knowledge were merely parts of the same structure, same surface, same understanding and cognitive framework, and the only missing elements are the bits to fill it in, like some wall mosaic of an ancient villa, whose image we can make out in spite of the missing parts. But in the chthonic mode, the spaces between do not belong to a single plane, to a unifying image that would come into focus if all the parts were present. Instead, as in a constellationary figure in an n-dimensional space, the infinitely replete espace of differences, where specificities, particularities, are each as replete as the last, as full and vibrant with beingness as the rest are darkly observed and absent. In practical terms, at the level of historical knowledge and recovery, this means that any ground on which we place the figures of interpretation has to be rethought as an n-
dimensional field, one with vectors of change, force fields of distortion and warp, and instabilities across every metric and from every point of view, position of apperception, and production—as if the black velvet lining on which the flints and bifaces reposed were a field of specifically infinite possibilities. Inside and outside the human perspective, to be sure, but within our descriptive approaches, analyses, intellectual apparatuses and instrumental insights, the gaps between pieces of evidence ought to be thought in terms of scales and granularities unpredictably variable, so that the space between those knapped blades, so neatly aligned, would never be measured according to a single standard, but instead, would be conceived in an unstable, variable, non-homogenous, discontinuous and undependable model. The chthonic mode is the recognition of the ineluctable impossibility of knowledge and the full admission of the partial delusion of knowing—but given a specific form, the configuration of the edges of absence. Dark matter, unknowable dimensions of stuff, and dark energy, inconceivable conditions of use, are everywhere.

Lascaux II is staged almost without an entry. The modest approach leads through pretty early summer green woods and up a paved incline leading out of the parking lot. Who would know, could know, that anything was in the area, that an underground revelation was just about to come into view, when it did, in the 1940s, through one of those apocryphal accidental discoveries of a channel in the hillside, a pathway into a cavern closed by rock fall, protected, enclosed for those many millennia. How many other sites lie hidden, completely blocked, concealed, never to see the light of day or be scanned by eyes and scraped by inquiry? Under the stretched canvas awning a small line of tourists waits, and we pass through into the reception area. A guide greets us, and the recitation begins, the polished talk, the repeated words of a script uttered multiple times daily. The displays in the antechamber light up in sequence, giving us background information, the history of the discovery, the familiar narrative of surprise and amazement. We are given a sense of prehistory as a pocket of preserved space in the past,
intact, pristine, travelling across time to the present, as if the self-defining character of its contents were self-evident once revealed. The mystery is always the same in these accounts—how could they, why did they, so long ago and yet—what follows is the recognition of “their” similarity to “our” selves. In reality, historically speaking, the distance is nothing. “We” are “them” but we cannot access that past in us. Instead, we externalize it, objectify it, in an entwined other-and-the-same construction.

Chthonic ignorance is not the same as the limits of knowledge as a mystical or phenomenological experience. It has nothing to do with the sublime, with the romantic abyss, with that which cannot be known because it belongs to the beingness of the world where “beyond-ness” has properties that cannot be grasped within the capacity of human thought. The chthonic does not derive from the distinction between being and thinking posited by the speculative realists, useful though such a formulation might be in thinking about other forms of non-knowledge. No, chthonic ignorance is about the incompleteness of the representation and description of what is, about the ways in which the ordering and structuring of knowledge production conceals a highly specific ignorance about what has been through the surface effects of that organization and narration. The ignorance is both made by and produces a highly configured and particular, but ungraspable and elusive, configuration of non-knowledge. This is concealed by consistent coherence of presentation, fictive versions of a generalized and ordered, but imagined, past, which ignores the specificity by which of every instance of what has been necessarily contributes to the account of what is. Knowledge is always inadequate, insufficient, and incomplete. But the incompleteness of historical knowledge is different from the incompleteness of scientific knowledge, social knowledge, or knowledge in other domains. Each has a particular set of conditions within which it comes into being and takes shape, a specific set of dynamic properties. The term chthonic serves to indicate the depth, the voidness, the infernal impenetrability of the unknowable spaces within the knowledge structures of prehistory. This is not the sublime, not even remotely, rather, the
chthonic is an infinitely expanding horizon of ignorance that opens along every line of insight, every vector of inquiry, every dimension of supposed knowledge related to the material world, the earthly remains, the buried, exhumed, revealed, and still largely concealed evidence of the past. The sheer poverty of evidence and the stretched plausibility of explanation are in inverse proportion to each other in the study of prehistory. Thus the exhibits of this new science expose all the ways the most recent innovations in dating, classifying, studying, examining, presenting, and arranging evidence, all the self-congratulatory demonstrations of the conviction and confidence in current methods of archaeology and paleo-anthropology (and paleo-biology, climate science, genetic analysis and so on), exemplify the chthonic mode. This becomes clear in action, in the presentation of prehistory in the structured sites of its recreation. The point is not to debunk the science or expertise of these methods and professions, but to call attention to their lack of knowledge as a limit with form, with properties and qualities, specific to the field. Chthonic ignorance is the black hole of our intellectual investigation of the prehistoric past defined as an absorptive site without fathomable dimensions.

The entry to the facsimile of the famous Lascaux hall of bulls is framed by a series of black ribs, flat cutout shapes. These hold the topographic details of the original surface in the cut patterns of their silhouettes. The design reinforces the exhibit-ness of the experience, its constructed simulation. As we move through the relatively tight space, we are repeating the mythic tale of the initial entry into the gallery down the long canal, some inverse birth event of return to the dark womb leading to the wonder of discovery. The ribs suggest the inside of a whale, with descent into an underworld reinforced by transit through the passage. The Lascaux discovery was made in 1940, war beginning, the politics of identity at play in the profiles of the discoverers, whose fates are meted out accordingly; a different buried tale. Lascaux is in a beautiful part of the Dordogne, where the landscape still holds the settlement patterns of medieval France in the lay of the land, the borders of the fields, their distribution on the gentle hillsides and among the
outcroppings of sandstone cliffs, and in the siting of grand houses, manors, local castles and defenses against marauding Vikings, those all too regular visitors to these parts in early centuries of the Common Era.

The ceiling and walls are remarkable, made with intense precision and respect for the craft of the original works, using the same mineral pigments—that same black manganese, iron oxide for red ochre, haematite, yellow limonite—and techniques (soft animal hair brushes, sticks, fingers). The effect is fully believable. The architecture of the cave and ceiling show no signs of fakery or cheap tricks of simulation. The images themselves range from the superb to the amateurish, with the best of the paintings fulfilling all the claims made for their mastery. The guide points a laser light, glossing the works, pointing out details of composition, iconography, and the identity of the animals. Scarce are the representations of the giant reindeer that was the daily food supply. Instead, bison, horses, a bear, a rhino, and a single human with a bird head falling backward and downward. The current theories of the organization of the whole include a mapping onto the stars in the night sky, but the millions of points of light could be serve as basis of any drawn figure. Constellations? Why? The internalized memory of an animal, physical, tactile, volumetric, is easy to imagine. We draw forms from memory all the time, conjuring their dimensional illusion as if sculpting, and, indeed, in many cases in this instance and others, the wall bulges and preexisting forms are used as a point of departure for the rendering, which takes advantage of the physical shape as part of the work. But to remember an abstract scheme of stars in a sky? A schematic abstraction? The body does not absorb that knowledge readily, even though the mind readily projects onto it. The infinitely provocative scrim of night scenes works with the same inexhaustible force as that of clouds or eroded earth forms, as instruments of hallucinatory invention. We have no idea, of course, of what intermediating documents were used, what sketches on bark or skin, on leaves or other scraps of material, might have been part of a much more complicated process. Here the chthonic yawns, opening
the space between what can be known and what is imagined, and into the void all kinds of speculation swarms—the cult theories and ones of totemism, pleasures of the hunt, awe of the beasts, worship of the animals, resolution of social conflict, reconciliation with the forces of the world, fear of the powers of nature, a supplication, an offering, or, perhaps, the sheer pleasure of sport or of making images in a space apart. All that is vanished spirals outward from every image, every reference lacking its trail of others, and we are left with the fact of presence, evidence, which is not, ever, self-evident.

In the hall of bulls, the painted gallery, the image of the megaloceros with its line of dots, black silhouette fading away as the head and antlers give way to the massive body, is incredibly powerful. The images are stark and real, the animals recollected fully and in authoritative detail. Active figures, shown moving across the undefined space of the cave’s interior, full of energy and momentum, they are piled on each other with an abundance that speaks of plentitude. Food may have been ample 13,000 years ago. Hunting was a developed skill. The climate was soft enough, with its rapid warming, to make game thrive, and the food supply was varied and abundant. These were human groups with storage pits, refined technology, family life, and trade. A widespread culture spread throughout various regions joined in a band below the ice shelf that lay over northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

The litany of the so-ancient, so long ago, and yet the continuity with modern humans is a persistent theme during the visit. These ancient humans have to be us and not us, be distinct and evolved, but still primitive for the now to be guaranteed its distance from the past. The desire to claim their achievements while assuring our advance is a constant refrain, a careful dance of rhetoric and nuance. At the end of the tour we are deposited out of the site and under the awning as the group behind us moves through. Each cluster of visitors overlaps with the next. The sounds of the recorded music in the antechamber merge with the gloss of the guides, but the integrity of the experience is sufficient to pass for genuine, for an accurate version of the real thing. The features of the
replica conform to our current modes of visual thinking and perception. No distance separates us from the terms on which the facsimile has been constructed as a facsimile. Its resonances are in synch with our own. Only over time will the distance begin to make itself apparent, the replica pull away from our belief system and our visual habits of feature detection and recognition and create the dark aporia that constitutes ignorance without limit inside the structures of apparent knowledge.

Later we go to Rouffignac, an actual cave, not a replica. Entry to its dark interior is through the cut in the rock, the grotto walls lead down into the waiting area filled with display cases. The credentials by which authentification of the site is documented are on conspicuous display. Henri Breuil and Andre Leroi-Gourhan, two of the looming figures in French anthropology, are featured in the texts of discovery and investigations. Rouffignac was never closed, never locked away from view like Lascaux, but its wonders, though significant, are not at the same scale of magnificence. The drawings on its walls may be younger by several thousand years than those of its famous neighbor. Estimated at 13,000 BP (Lascaux is dated to approximately 17,000 BP), Rouffignac was a tourist attraction in the 19th century, and mentioned as early as 1575 in François de Belleforest’s *Cosmographie universelle*. Such details of historiography emphasize the continuities of knowledge as gaps in understanding, and their relation to each other into the present. We see what we know to see and grasp only what is within comprehension and familiar frameworks.

As part of the performance of the grotto’s pedigree, it is protected by a locked metal gate to which the proprietor or official holds the keys. In this case, the guide is an energetic man of late middle age, grey hair in a small pony tail, efficient in his movements, clear and direct in his speech, and balanced in his remarks. He qualifies all statements with “we think” or “it may be” and “there is speculation that” instead of making any claims. Informed by current research, and clearly passionate about the cave, he runs the small train that was built to take visitors down into its depths. The carts rattle
along on the rails, worn but reliable. The guide stops the train at set intervals, descends, points his flashlight to the walls, and describes the variety of engraved images, drawn images, finger flutings, stencils, tectiform signs, and other markings on the walls. In the part of the cave we visit, the great “Grand-Père” mammoth is among the outstanding images, drawn from acute and intimate knowledge. The guide, it turns out, is the proprietor of the cave, which was rediscovered by his father and turned into an attraction when the vogue for visiting prehistoric sites began. Mr. Rouffignac spends his days running the train up and down the rails, stopping each time in the same spots on the pilgrimage, and enthralling yet another group of visitors, each hour, with the wonders of the grotto. He owns it. It owns him. Fealties are mutual arrangements. He pours himself into the expanding field of prehistory, alert to new developments and changes nimble in his constant construction of the tale of his cave among the others.

The terms of authenticity are always in play, riding a different set of currents than those of knowledge presentation and its surface coherence. Authenticity is meant to be experiential, the enhanced perceptual sensibility brought on by the official recognition of the category of the real. This is an actual cave. The drawings, all black lines on the walls and the scratched outlines are the immediate and (supposedly) unmediated expression of human beings who made these images thirteen thousand years ago. The animals depicted are largely gone now, extinct. No mammoths, no woolly rhinos, no cave bears still roam the area. In the Rouffignac drawings, the outlines of the animals are formed by profile on their heads and backs, and by the long straight pattern of shaggy hair hanging from their chins, legs, bellies. The fur is not added to an already made form, but creates the form, an effect of observation not analysis. These are not drawings of bodies with fur on them, but shapes made and appearances recorded from observation. Not volume, not movement, not color, just visual understanding directed these outlines, some layered onto others with the casual look of exercises and practice works.
Most fascinating of all are the tectonic forms, abstract and schematic, made like archaic spread sheets, time-keeping grids, or plot maps. They are ordered and organized, and could be representations of land use and settlement patterns, of time and monthly or yearly cycles, or of nothing at all, some game or logic puzzle for the mind expressed in lines and tables, some filled, some empty, some arranged in a symmetrical order side by side. But that they are deliberate expressions of specific schemes is apparent, and their abstractness indicates conceptual thinking beyond the representational skill present in the animals. They could, perhaps, be images of something, but most likely are images as something. The fact that such an act of abstract conception was made is what is remarkable. What depth of darkness opens in the light of supposed knowledge, what new dimensions of specific ignorance are shaped in relation to these graphic forms?

The feel of the cave, breathing, alive, still present, its limits of our access reached and its gaping holes beyond, is a distinct part of the experience. The mind races out, like the radar of a bat, to hit the limits of the ceiling, the walls, and then ping back, bringing the measure of that gaze into the full construction of the place. The cave is cool, the small train runs just inside the limits of its walls as the chambers close in and open up again. The interiority of the space is more striking than its subterraneanity. Enclosed, safe? The bears used the caves as well, taking their long naps in the same interiors. Those encounters cannot have been conversational. Rouffignac has its own “great ceiling” as the culmination of the experience, layered and rich. The habit of drawing over existing drawings is everywhere in cave art, as if one image serves as provocation to another, or as model, or as invitation to re-inscribe, as in a performance for concentration, instruction for the making. The range of fine to amateur line work is present here, though the distance between extreme accomplishment of form, color, volume, shape and sketchy attempt is not as great as in Lascaux, where the fully realized horses and bison are works of skill that could not be realized without practice and talent. Expertise, defined very simply in formal terms, is the capacity to make a convincing line with variable weight
and thickness, to handle shading, create volume in a smooth curve of shifting concentrations of color, and create visual interest in the rendering so that its component parts play against each other in a combination of surprise and harmony. Too formalist? Why? The capacity to observe, appreciate, make, model, comprehend, and produce form is everywhere in the late Paleolithic, in the tools, the grave sites, the beadwork, the carved handles of hunting implements. No simple instrumental function attaches to or depends upon these aesthetic properties, so they serve another purpose, of pleasure to the eye and mind, of thought and reflection, conjuring and making.

When the train comes to its end, the lights in the chamber where we stop show the dark gaping holes beyond. The lower level of the cave is not accessible where the great ceiling hangs above an open shaft and the plan of images divides into half circles of animals oriented one way and then another. We have descended to the lowest point of the visit. The sense of wonder is enhanced by the depth, the question of how and why hangs over every observation, even if the modes of execution of the works make them legible. The way we pick out visual features of the world is the same as that of our ancestors—profiles and contours, the visible registration of the optical. But who made these and over what span of time, as a brief activity of a small group, or a regular activity within thousands of years of Cro-Magnon culture? The forces of the social are unrecoverable from physical evidence. Transactions and networks of communicative exchange are gone. The proprietor has us all disembark to look around as he snaps on the utility lights that are the standard equipment in the caves. On their long cords, with hooks into guard fences or bits of metal screen, they also enhance authenticity with their temporary character reinforcing that we are visitors to a site. In his khaki clothes and with his efficient authority, he flips the seat backs and prepares the train for its return trip to the upper reaches. He does this multiple times in the course of every day.

To see the cave at Font-de-Gaume one stands in line, starting from a very early hour. The tickets go on sale at 9:30 and the valley is still entirely in shadow at 8 when we
arrive to take our place behind the dozen people already queued. It’s cold, and the wait stretches until the employees arrive, open the window, and dispense the day’s allotment of tickets, gone in fifteen minutes. Sixty visitors a day to this cave, a smaller number to neighboring Combarelles, where we go first, and then Cap Blanc. The reception area at Combarelles is a small spare structure not far from the cave entrance, a reddish-yellow gash of cliff visible amid the lush foliage of late spring. The beauty of the region is part of the charm, and helps the argument that it would have been a fine environment to inhabit, even in a shifted climate. The end of the Paleolithic was warm, even warmer than the present, until the younger Dryas, 12,800 to 11,500 before the present, when a bitter cold descended.

In the modest waiting area at Combarelles, pages from Henri Breuil’s early published versions of the drawings are displayed. They are extremely careful copies of the scratched and outlined forms. The sense of observation, of repressing any individual expression on his part in the service of producing a copy, is remarkable. The images are well-made in their re-transcription, even bereft of the physical shape and volume of the originals. Here the conceptual distance is marked from current methods of analysis. For Breuil understood, and thus saw, these as drawings, as images, not as site-works, even if he appreciated the use of the shapes of the walls, he lifted the works out of their positions, placements, viewing angles, and flattened them into his careful lines.

Our guide is a serious, compact, woman in down vest and hiking clothes who leads us up to the cave entrance. Again the metal grate, the physical key, the sliding back of the entry, and the sense of patrimony protected by an archaic method. Nothing in the security system depends on technological advances beyond these rusting gates with their anachronistic quasi-medievalism. Only in Chauvet are electronic systems in place around the original site, and in Niaux, motion detectors were installed in the cave. The tour is serious, precise, unmystified. We begin to get the sense of the widespread activity in the region, of the miniscule portion of remains, of the cultural pattern rather than the
exception that the images represent. The levels of skill are varied. Apprenticeship shows in the juxtaposition of well-drawn and hesitant, of works done with confidence and those produced by a hand learning the fundamentals of those descriptive profiles. For again, and usually, it is the profile view that we see most frequently, the identifying features marked and clear. Feet disappear, and occasionally, a head is turned, a gesture of shifting point of view is marked. Throughout, the sense of space is reinforced by the use of the cave’s preexisting forms and by the layering of legs, bodies, and shifts of scale.

The business of the caves is another aspect of the experience. The guides are daily workers in the industry of prehistory. They guard the entrances, hold the keys, walk the same paths and make the effort each day to keep visitors’ hands from walls, their bodies from rubbing up accidentally against any surface, keep their photographic impulses under control, and manage to sound freshly enthusiastic during each repeat performance. The modesty of Combarelles is part of its strength, as if authenticity relied on fewer rather than grander claims.

Back in the reception area is a small notebook that contains a copies of images from a cave called la Marche, each carved on a small block, each a specific portrait, unique and particular. The sense of character and personness is a surprise, without precedent in any of the other sites. Are they real? Fakes? From some other moment and later date? The scarcity of evidence weighs heavily against the strength of belief. The desire for certainty, and a way to position these remarkable drawings, with their suggestive portraiture, pushes the dating of conceptual developments backwards. All the animals we have seen so far are iconic images, conventionalized and generalized as forms, they are not portraits. The heads raise the question of individuation as a concept informing perception and representation. Distinction of one person from another has to be an ancient trait in animals, as parents know and find their young, and babies have to know whom to trust. But these are faces and heads with bits of clothing, individual faces, styles. Many were carved in the floor, and overlaid, again, one on top of another,
stressing the performative dimensions of their making. Without a way to date the
scratched surfaces, fixing their moment of origin is difficult. Conceptually, these are far
beyond any other works we have seen, and again the vector of ignorance absorbs our
understanding. Even conceptual frameworks are unbound by the conundrum.

At Cap Blanc the enormous sculpted horses are carved in the huge living rock, in
its very sheltering belly, and have been dated by the other evidence at the site. In
particular, the grave of a woman, knees bent and body curled into the fetal position
accompanied by carving tools, flints, and blade, and beads in abundance. A reconstructed
model of her head portrays her as a wide cheeked, blue-eyed, reddish-haired woman who
may have worn an elaborate beadwork headdress. The shelter is not a cave but a ledge in
the rock, one of those natural formations occupied by human beings for security, safety,
perhaps also for the sense of place that a defined and enclosed environment provides. The
horses are remarkable, their physicality clearly felt, their sculpted forms made as actual
as possible through the tactile knowledge that brought their shapes into being from
acquaintance with the bodies of the animals. Physical knowledge, embodied and familiar,
shows in the forms. Was she their sculptor? Working in the evenings as the rest of the
family group sat by the fire doing their handwork and craft activities? The suggestion is
that she is responsible, and hence was buried with the tools of her trade. The elaborate
garve site, remade as a model below the actual carvings, has a poignant vulnerability. She
lies curled, quiet, long-dead, perfectly modeled, uncannily present even in the simulation
of her skeleton, which seems far more real that the bust in the glass case with its glass
eyes and wax skin.

Font de Gaume is the last of the caves with polychrome painting that is still open
to public view. There the guide is rhapsodic, his voice breathless with mystery at every
turn. He makes prolific use of the word *mastery* in his descriptions, wanting to
communicate the full awe with which we should experience the works. The word *art* is
rarely used, as the connotations are so complex the term cannot serve a simple
designatory function. The category is too malleable in its many anachronistic aspects to allow any easy justification, and here the chthonic yawns again, a gap that cannot be measured separates the images in the cave from those of the present, and any assumption that elides them covers that chasm of unknowing with a slim pretext of continuity. Still, our guide’s admiration of the skills, talents, achievements of the artists celebrates their creativity and expression. The cave is old, had been known and inhabited near its opening for nearly 25,000 years. But it was “discovered” within the context of studies of prehistory, of the assertions of the eminent French anthropologist, Emile Cartailhac, and the work of a local schoolteacher and amateur anthropologist, Denis Peyrony. Peyrony’s collections of artifacts ended up in the hands of a local collector, benefactor, who absorbed them into his own private museum. The local secrets are many, and many caves are kept private, hidden, and artifacts as well, to avoid supervision and scrutiny or the prying public eye. One local collector is known by his penchant for instruments of torture, and rumors of his sado-masochistic character are whispered along with the accounts of his holdings of prehistoric relics. The local ownership of this prehistory is fiercely felt, and the distribution of responsibilities among rural and regional and national offices is also, as becomes evident at Chauvet.

The new Chauvet is a theme park, just opened, renamed the Caverne Pont d’Arc. It spreads over a sprawling site with a museum, a replica, a reception area with shop, and other bits and pieces of an entertainment complex taking over the hillside. The “real” Chauvet is hidden somewhere in the neighborhood, locked, guarded with electronic security, and monitored constantly. Archaeological methods have changed since the discoveries at Lascaux and Altamira, and the careful exploration and documentation of the actual site at Chauvet is scrupulously done, with full emphasis on the superiority of new methods to old, upping the ante of authenticity and professionalization of technique. The dating of Chauvet throws the question of progress and development into a new frame, since the distance separating the claimed dates of its images’ production at 30,000
BC and that of every other known work of cave painting or drawing is so vast. The notion of cultural continuity lasting more than ten or fifteen thousand years—in styles of drawing, techniques, approaches to use of the walls, the scale and design of images, the themes and iconographic programs—is difficult to grasp, though by contrast to the knowledge of flint axe and arrowhead production, which endured more than a million years, the time period for image-making is short. Our evidence, again, is so scarce, and our sense of what percentage of what was is so inestimable that the scope of what is missing is impossible to gauge.

The facsimile is a modern miracle of technological production and simulation. Every nook, cranny, crease, and bump in the wall surface and cave formations has been imitated. If Lascaux is a modest, earnest, and respectful hand-done work of studied professional skill, then Chauvet is techno-splendid simulation at an enormous scale. The entrance to the faux cavern is designed to handle large groups, and to stage their movements through the site in a series of sluice gate actions. Onto the waiting ramp, then to the terrace station shielded by a concrete awning, then into the small theater, then into the entry hall, and so on. The building itself is sculptural, its sharply pleated concrete forms a modern interpretation of a grotto’s natural architecture. Theatricality permeates. Our initial guide is a handsome young man, confident and affable, who holds our attention to gather it into a collective focus before passing us, now a visiting unit, on to a very pretty young woman in jeans and trainers, her Chauvet-wear topping the outfit so she is branded to the site. The production of prehistory has taken on the full weight of the corporate-state system. Later we find the locals are resentful, taxed to produce the site and having to hope the revenues it generates will return more than traffic, pollution, and trampling of their landscape to the region.

Inside, the guide leads us into the grotto, which is vast and as expertly made as three-dimensional modelling and virtual rendering can make it. The stalactites sparkle with fake mineral crystals, the walls are grainy, bubbled, bulging, or smoothed in an
impressive simulation of textures. The path is wide, edged by handrails, and each of the points on the pilgrimage is a site for which the guide has a well-memorized script. Her precise laser pointer moves with skill through the list of features we are to note, and she speaks as if we are in the actual cave, with no qualifications or distance. At each point we are aware of the other groups moving through behind us and of the assembly line character of the experience. The possibility of discovery, already reduced to nil by the production process, is further reduced by the directed activity of the encounter with the cave, as if prolonged exposure might reveal the thinness of the illusion, or spoil the trick of it. So we move along, our eyes aimed in one direction after another, to appreciate the well-constructed version of an original sealed from view or air or damage somewhere in the neighborhood. The historicity of vision being what it is, the question is how long it will take for what counted as significant features to become obsolete, to seem as unconvincing as the studies of whales in old engravings or of the features of Mars in the decades when its surface elements were read as constructed canals tended by an advanced civilization.

One striking difference between the iconographic programs in the drawings at Chauvet and those of the caves at Lascaux, Font de Gaume, Combarelles, and Cap Blanc is the presence of lions. In the later caves, the bison and megaloceros prevail, along with horses and aurochs, and the occasional bear or feline. In Chauvet the lions are a magnificent presence, their strong-jawed profiles layered and strong. Knowledge of the animals is palpable, again, in the rendering of their forms as visual and physical objects, things looked at, but also, touched. Their drawn forms are felt not just observed. The sense of composition is also striking—with animals pouring out of a crevass in the cave wall, aimed in each direction, as if from a source. The horses seem to move, their measured cadences sufficiently in and out of synch to suggest motion relative to each other. Dynamism abounds. And one notable image, a vulva on a prominent vertical protrusion from the roof of the cave, is topped by drawings of a lion and a bison in close
proximity. It begs to be read as a totemic work embedded in ritual. But no ritual has left its remains, no celebration, no instruments or objects, can be recovered. Paleolithic music existed, the flute bones and humming knives spun on a piece of hide or twisted hair also remain. The sounds are even recoverable by spinning the tool through the air, but it is our air, not theirs. The prehistoric atmospheres have vanished. But any speculation is just that, a casting of thoughts into darkness, impenetrable, absorptive, the many fathoms of illegibility. The infinitude of what could be said, might be imagined, expands in all directions from the physical evidence.

In the museum exhibit, away from the pseudo-subterranean gallery, a pair of reconstructed paleo-lions perched on rocks greets the entering visitors, crouched to spring from their simulated ledge. A woolly mammoth and rhinoceros have been reconstructed, replete with dirt in their fur and mud clots around their hindquarters. The interactive displays are state of some art, and again seem destined for quick obsolescence, unlike the panoramas in which the extinct stuffed animals have been situated. These plaster and paint conventions have a curious staying power. But all is unreal, designed for effect and for an entertainment-based approach to the presentation of information about prehistory offered in sound-bites and short snippets of captioned images. The arguments are implicit, the evidence presented as self-evident, the weave of history made palatable through reduction and simplification.

Our host at the bed and breakfast has been in the original site, and to say so is to act as if some aura transfer could occur through the mere utterance of those words, as if some molecules of the cave’s atmosphere had attached themselves to him to be dispensed, like extremely precious rare elements, at moments of exchange. The conversational transaction puts all the advantages on his side, as one who has seen what we will never, and so awe and mystery ripple outward from the cave through the transactional media of social life.
Other caves exist, and are open—Pech Merle with its spotted horse, Niaux, the high grotto isolated above a small valley, and in Spain, Las Monedas, and the cave complexes, and so on. Each is staged slightly differently in terms of actual physical place, access protocols, the length of the visit, the tone of the guide. Each cave has its discovery narrative and its authentication history. Henri Breuil, Andre Leroi-Gourhan, and other more recent authorities (state anthropologists with official credentials) show up in the interpretative panels, the entry plaques, the references, and the histories. The naming scheme for Paleolithic phases of culture is marked by the French anthropologists, by their findings in locations that lend their names to the Aurignacian, Mousterian, Souletrean, Azilian and so on. At Niaux the climax to the visit is in the bottom, furthest reach of the cave canal, a collection of works in black outline on the walls of a great domed space that takes up sound and echoes, multiples, its effects. The chamber has a cathedral-like feel, and the lighting reinforces a sense of the vaulted structure of the ceiling. Here a gathering might well take place, with song and music, but the cave floor was long ago disturbed, the many visitors into the grotto over the years having left their traces and erased those of greater antiquity. The cave was a place for tourists for centuries though the claim is that the great Salon Noir was only discovered in the early 20th century. Niaux is wet, the clay deposits slippery, and descent lowers the temperature. The cave breathes. Alive, it has its processes and history, its stored and latent knowledge of visitors and events, the touch of hands on its surfaces from which we restrain. Niaux has no trace of animal presences, unlike Chauvet, where the hollows worn by sleeping cave bears still depress the (simulated) floor. Small scraps of evidence, made precious through attention and necessity, each play an enormous role in the making of an image of prehistory out of these minutiae of the past. The larger picture, mapped through genetics, paleobiology and botany, the study of populations, their distribution, movements, and food sources, is piece together tiny bit by bit, as if the space between each piece were an implied plain of continuity, rather than a terrain of broken temporalities, scales of mixed metrics and
unassimilable evidence. The assumption is counter to the concept of chthonic ignorance, which is premised on the notion that no single plane of order emerges from or is ground under the fragments, but that the radiant array of possibilities structured into non-knowledge will always structure the past, prehistory in particular, as a complex unfathomable realm of irreconcilable incommensurable evidences. Not that we can’t know the past, or reconstruct a plausible history of ourselves as a species, just that the whole undertaking is fraught with methodological assumptions of continuity that are contradicted by the insights that gape in the spaces between the points of knowledge as the knowable.

We come to the end of our tour, working backwards towards the site of the earliest evidence and recent excavations, even as we return to one of the first sites of discovery, Altamira, then Burgos and Atapuerca. At Altamira the facsimile room with its re-rendered ceiling is unguided by a tour, and even though the numbers of visitors are timed, and the ramp into the open hall where the bulls are drawn on the protruding bosses of the ceiling is tastefully lit and the installation shadowed to create a particular effect, the freedom to move, turn, look, and return is welcome. But it reframes the rare treasure, a guarded space or site of patrimony and heritage, which is the way the caves are presented, into an exhibit space. Because this is not real, we are allowed to look as long and in as many ways as we like. The open space allows for circulation, and the best of the bison are as fully realized as any images anywhere. The clichés are true with respect to the images, and the magnificent drawings retain their impressive and inspiring quality. As in all the caves, some ill-drawn outlines, evidence of unpracticed hands, are present, enough to make clear that learning was part of the process, skill development a recognized fact or need, or differences in skill level also perceptible. The amateurish works are neither large nor prominently positioned in any of the caves. Perhaps even among themselves, the makers saw distinctions, degrees of refinement, skill. How they assessed their own work and that of others, whether on the simple formal criteria that
seem to have held across millennia, is as unclear as all the rest of the vanished circumstances and conditions of these works’ appearance. The viewing of the artifacts would shift profoundly if they were situated within actual cultural practices, networks of linked thought and value, exchange transactions and occurrences that served a purpose, whether that were amusement, pleasure, momentary distraction or joy. But the unrecoverable is infinite, the chthonic mode of ignorance absorptive, and explanation cannot be manufactured from what remains.

The Altamira museum contains information on climate and technology, adornment and grave site structure. The displays are thick with information, and sophistication nuances their tone. Only their decision to compare the Paleolithic humans of the past with the bushmen of contemporary Africa feels uncomfortable, and the scenes of giraffe slaughter and butchering are as hard to watch as the commentary is to listen to without cringing from a sense of the inappropriateness of the suggestions that “primitive” patterns of life continue. Differences are apparent, and the very fact of the camera’s presence in the ethnographic film is so disturbing it is impossible to discount. How, when, and under what conditions of consent, or lack thereof, were these images obtained? Who witnesses the present to render it as the past? By what right are the activities of one group of contemporary human beings characterized by those of another, reified, and put into comparison with a past that cannot be accessed. Claims of similarity obscure the distances and differences.

In Burgos the Museum of Human Evolution is more historiographic in its presentation than any of the other exhibits we have seen, marking the milestones of discovery in a self-reflexive way. These full-scale models of early hominids display attentive expressions, their eyes and faces given an uncanny quality of focus and presence. The small hairy bodies, the larger stout and square ones, the blocky Neanderthals and slimmer *homo habilis* are each displayed without any prudery or reservation. Males and females, they are upright apes, primates, whose changing
capacities are made evident in the way they look at us. The exchange of glances, marked by distinct expressions, suggests shifts in the kind of communication that might take place and thus the uncanny sense of presence in these models is linked to their presumed sociality. Sociality is the antithesis of the chthonic, since instead of abysses and gaps, it is a constructed network of exchanges, constituted by reciprocities of varying degrees of success, but reciprocities nonetheless. Sociality is not recoverable, simply inhabited, made, acted, not as a full presence in some mythic way, but in the simple fact of how it occurs, however subject to all the reservations and qualifications of interpretation that might be, it is constituted by its actuality. Chthonic ignorance, on the other hand, is never actual, but its always the infinitely expanding absence in many specific particularities in relation to points of material evidence, unearthed. Why invent such a concept? What purpose does it serve? It erases the presumption of unifying ground from the scene of historical recovery and speculation, makes all evidence a mere artifact on its own among others, its field of reference and historical framework speculative, no matter how tightly the tolerance of certainty might approach the limit of ignorance—or should that be inverted so that the tolerance of ignorance approaches the limit of certainty? No, that is what is currently practiced and believed, as if the goal were to succeed in some fully revealed knowledge that is always there, simply waiting for enough evidence to accumulate that the veils of doubt are lifted. The chthonic mode argues that each bit of evidence multiples the factors of uncertainty, even if two flints or chipped blades or knapped stones are almost the same as each other, the relation between them cannot be guaranteed any more than the preliminary, amateurish sketches of horses can be linked through some progression or projection to the well-crafted images of bison. The between-ness has no ultimate certainty to it, no final resolution into the known.

When we go to the last site on our itinerary, Atapuerca, the timescale we confront stretches through the carefully marked, read, recorded, and studied layers back more than a million years. Human creatures, *homo erectus*, were in this region of Spain that long
ago, having emerged from Africa in waves and along routes we cannot yet track. They had thousands of years to accomplish this migration, it was not a forced or rapid march. Survival and daily life were under constant pressure, with cyclic changes in climate and food supply. These were stalwart creatures, hard-worked and hard-working, but like other creatures who evolved, they gradually developed methods to control their basic life, meet the need for food, manage the procreation process. The details of all of this become a narrative in which progression cannot help but be present, even as the contributions of genetic analysis begin to show the wide variety of settlements, pockets of development, stasis or decay across the broader fields and stains of early human evolution. What is possible, not what is optimal, is what survives, even as advantages edge one population forward over another others remain in their backwaters, isolated, evolving along their own trajectory until they cannot or still do interbreed and lose their boundaries as a distinct group again. No single line of evolution explains the specifics in all their detail.

Standing in a chill cut through a mountain, looking at the marked layers of the site, each one tens of thousands of years or more, staring into this one sample of the history of the species, held in the earth, the sense of how much must lie beneath, hidden, lost, destroyed, ignored, damaged, or never to be found is as dizzying as the recognition that the tiny fragments of recovered evidence are constantly shifting understanding from solution to question, from closure in interpretation to opening of inquiry in the generative mode of chthonic ignorance. Here the earth is open, literally, in a gash in the landscape made originally as a path for a railroad line. The exposed strata yielded incredible artifacts, including human remains, that changed the timescales on which the construction of prehistory in Europe could be constituted.

Everywhere around us, an open countryside stretches, with small villages and roads, little development, and little sign of all that must be concealed within the inconspicuous landscape. Who can tell, who would have known, what histories are lying below the surface? What unevennesses of strata and deposits, remains and pockets, mixed
and broken, washed into slag heaps and buried under sludge and rock, would be revealed if all the landscape were turned over and opened in the same manner. The Atapuerca excavation is elegantly, carefully, artfully professional, with its grids of twine and precise flags marking every find. Twenty-eight individuals have been identified from skeletal remains, an incredible number, and the site, a natural cave into which prey and predator fell or threw their garbage and other leavings, is a treasure trove. The rational grid, so elementary in its ability to provide a scrim of order against which to register the evidence, stands apart from the mass of rock and sand, the crumbling layers shifting and pressured onto each other, mute and articulate. But the grid is merely a device, a method whose reliability provides a way to map the admittedly impossible task of reconstruction. The archaeologists are put their points of reference into place, but the coordinates cannot be mapped on a single plane or into a unified line. The impossibility of recovery arises not from the partial nature of the evidence, but from the fractured, faceted, character of the actuality it conceals, in the infernal n-dimensionality of chthonic ignorance as a specific form of non-knowledge.

The fascination of prehistory is inexhaustible. The intrigue of imagining ourselves in that otherness, its emergent condition of coming-into-being of the human in the differentiation from precedents and ancestors is absorptive, engaging. But the challenge it presents is not merely one of empirical remains, or of rational schemes of analysis, or even of imaginative reconstructions, but of conceptual epistemes, of the difficulty, impossibility even, of grasping the properties of matter outside our conception, experience, senses and cognitive capacity and of understanding conditions of those conceptions within transactional networks of use that constituted their identity as value through use. We imagine we can understand, by reducing or diminishing capacity, to a simplified, early, less complex version of ourselves. But the opposite might as likely be the case, the sensorium of our these earlier beings was developed in ways we have lost, of keenness of sight, smell, taste, hearing, body sensation, group communication and
connection. Or not. We cannot imagine the other of ourselves except within familiar frames of reference, and there, at the limit of that conceptual boundary, the fuller history of prehistory remains, in the blind spots of chthonic ignorance and projective imaginaries that arise from the dark matter spaces of the caverns and the dark energy of the past.