

Beasts of the Southern World: More-than-Human History and the Anthropocene

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Charles Darwin jotted in a notebook in 1838, “He who understands the baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.” Essentially, this book project tries to answer Darwin’s call. It tries to “understand” two powerful primates by exploring the historical relationship between *Papio ursinus* and *Homo sapiens*. Humans have been captivated by baboons for thousands of years. There has been a range of connections and meanings ascribed to baboons in various cultures right up to the present. Our evolutionary, biological, and behavioral overlapping and shared physical and metaphorical spaces have created a special historical relationship.

This other primate, the baboon—with whom we last shared a common ancestor over 20 million years ago—has served as a mirror to our own society. There has been a gamut—as this book will contend—between ideas of physio-emotional connection and outrage at the mere thought of such connection. On the one hand, there is the notion of a closeness between the human and the nonhuman primates, evident in several strains of thought: from Indigenous cosmologies to Linnaeus’s attempts to classify them over Darwin’s theory of evolutionary kinship to the twenty-first century’s quest to seek “personhood” for individual primates. These have been fissured through with ambiguities and shifting ideas about human hierarchy predicated on race, class, and gender, as this book will show.

At once akin and alien, comic and cosmic, subhuman and supernatural, baboons open up hidden histories with their category-challenging roles within human cultures. Part of responding to today’s crisis of biodiversity loss, is writing history-beyond-humanity. So, this book explores the role of history and culture in the lives of animals and their close entanglements with our own. It is intended for those who are pondering the historical roots of our treatment of nonhuman animals, their agency in co-shaping our world, and, particularly, our deeply entangled relationships with one another. I show how human–animal history needs to push back into deep history, drawing on palaeontology, archaeology, and rock art, combined with vernacular knowledge, oral tradition, and traditional ecological knowledge. In exploring the long social history of two primate species, I examine the evidence both for our impact on animal cultures and how our own have been fundamentally contoured by the animal “Others.”