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978-0-521-76560-2 - Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America

Cannon Schmitt

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## DARWIN AND THE MEMORY OF THE HUMAN

When the young Charles Darwin landed on the shores of Tierra del Fuego in 1832, he was overwhelmed: nothing had prepared him for the sight of what he called “an untamed savage.” The shock he felt, repeatedly recalled in later years, definitively shaped his theory of evolution. In this original and wide-ranging study, Cannon Schmitt shows how Darwin and other Victorian naturalists transformed such encounters with South America and its indigenous peoples into influential accounts of biological and historical change. Redefining what it means to be human, they argue that the modern self must be understood in relation to a variety of pasts – personal, historical, and ancestral – conceived of as savage. Schmitt reshapes our understanding of Victorian imperialism, revisits the implications of Darwinian theory, and demonstrates the pertinence of nineteenth-century biological thought to current theorizations of memory.

CANNON SCHMITT is Associate Professor of English at the University of Toronto.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as “background,” feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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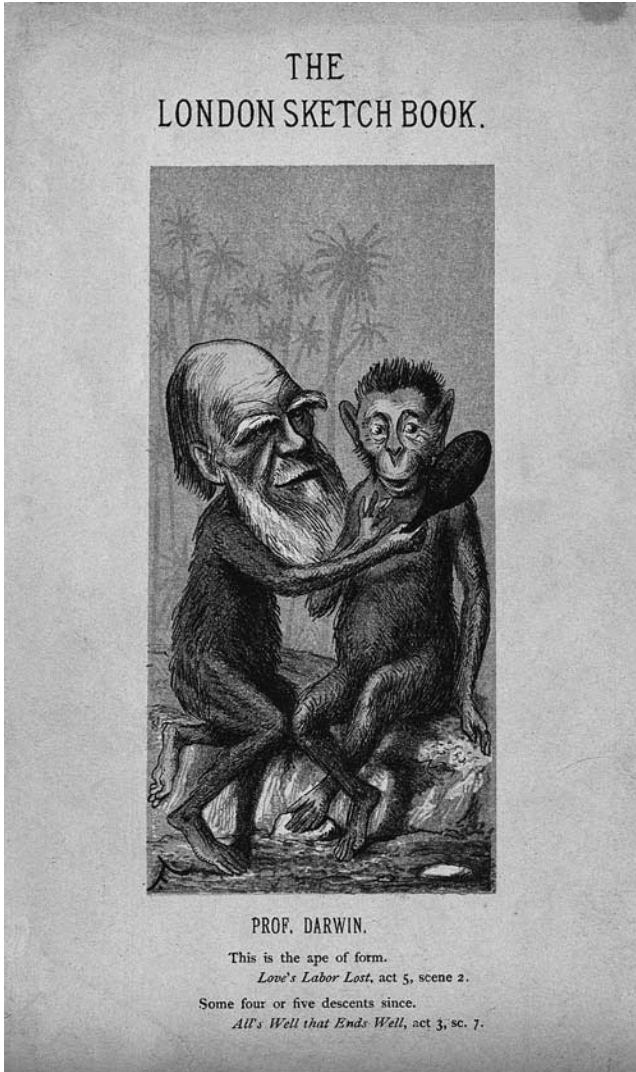
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CANNON SCHMITT

*University of Toronto*



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*In Memoriam*

*Tabitha Beckett Chesnut, 1968–1998*

*James Doss Chesnut, 1941–1975*

*Bryant Lester Yeomans, 1921–1999*

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One of my beloved and influential aunts, Saralyn Chesnut, tells a story about how in childhood her older brothers, one of whom was my father, liked to tease her with vocabulary she hadn't yet learned. “You have ancestors,” they would say accusingly – to which she would reply, scandalized, “No I don't!” At the end of writing a book about, among other things, the scandal (but also the pleasure) of having to acknowledge certain ancestors and relatives, I am put in mind of how much is due members of my family, both those no longer with us and those who remain. It is to the memory of three of them, my brother, Tabby Beckett Chesnut, my father, James Doss Chesnut, and my maternal grandfather, B. L. Yeomans, that the book is dedicated. Helen Chesnut, my paternal grandmother, leaves a void as well. Much love, thanks, and appreciation go to Saralyn; Rebecca Yeomans, my other beloved and influential aunt; Sally Yeomans, my maternal grandmother; and my indefatigably loving and supportive stepfather, Jack Schmitt, and mother, Zebe Schmitt. Dana Seitler emboldened me to write the book I wanted to rather than the one I thought I should. Beyond that, and beyond being my toughest critic and most reliable friend, she continues to reveal the ways in which this seemingly all-too-explored world brims with possibility. Finally, for the wonder of our son Beckett there are no words. As the figures I write about find themselves doing so often, I will simply have to take refuge in observing that some things, the most momentous, are ineffable – and leave it at that.