

Excerpts from

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The Global Grey Parrot:

How a Charismatic African Animal Became an International Commodity
Forthcoming with University of Washington Press, 2027



Plate 1 “*Psittacus timneh* and *Psittacus erithacus*” A. Goering in Carl R. Hennicke, *Der Graupapagei in der Freiheit und in der Gefangenschaft* (Gera: E.M. Kohler, 1895).

Introduction

In the summer of 2014, I was casting around for a research project. One evening at India Point Park in Providence, Rhode Island, where I live, I saw a man with a grey parrot on his shoulder. I thought, “That bird is African! It is here, and it has a history!”

I had never seen a grey parrot in the wild, but I knew a bit about them. When I saw that bird, I thought about the celebrity parrot Alex, scientist Irene Pepperberg’s research subject. Alex may have been the most famous bird in the world. He learned to tell, in English, paper from plastic, triangles from squares, and green from blue. He was an exceptional research subject and Pepperberg became a pioneer in the struggle to establish the fact of animal cognition in the behavioral sciences. Seeing that bird, I also remembered one in Lamu, Kenya, who was confined to a cage in a restaurant. The cage was small and offered the poor bird nothing to do. They sat there frozen, not responding to me. I thought of zoo animals with no hope of a satisfying life, pacing their cages. On that evening in India Point Park, it occurred to me that greys were beautiful, emotionally sensitive, wicked smart, and globally present. I thought they might make a good topic for a history.¹

I was just completing a book on birding cultures in colonial and post-colonial Africa. I knew it was possible to watch birds in history. Because of their intelligence and sociability, because

¹ Irene M. Pepperberg, *Alex & Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Uncovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence—and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process* (Harper Collins, 2008); Irene M. Pepperberg, *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots* (Harvard University, 2009)

some are beautifully colored and extravagantly feathered, because some sing wonderfully and nearly all of them fly, birds have long attracted human admiration. Over millennia, we have domesticated a few, eaten many, thought about more, and turned some into icons. We have even made some up. Put them in the context of human pasts and birds become historical subjects. Birds are not merely present in history; they are also historical actors. Birds and people have been fellow travelers all over the world, throughout much of human time. They are not only suitable subjects in ornithology or ecology, but in the humanities and social sciences. When we credit their actions, we also learn more about people. My hunch in that park was right: grey parrots are good for thinking about history.²

The species of bird I saw that evening has become the lead actor in this book (plate 1). When I saw that bird, I thought of them as an “African grey parrot.” Use of the word “African” in the name was appropriate because the study of history emphasizes context. Grey parrots originated in Africa, and most grey parrots have lived there. But, like Africa itself, grey parrots have a history of connection to other places. The history of this species tracks some major themes of the history of Africa in the world: intercontinental trade, including the slave trade, European empire, and economic dependence in the post-colonial period. So, the subject of this book is the *global* grey parrot.

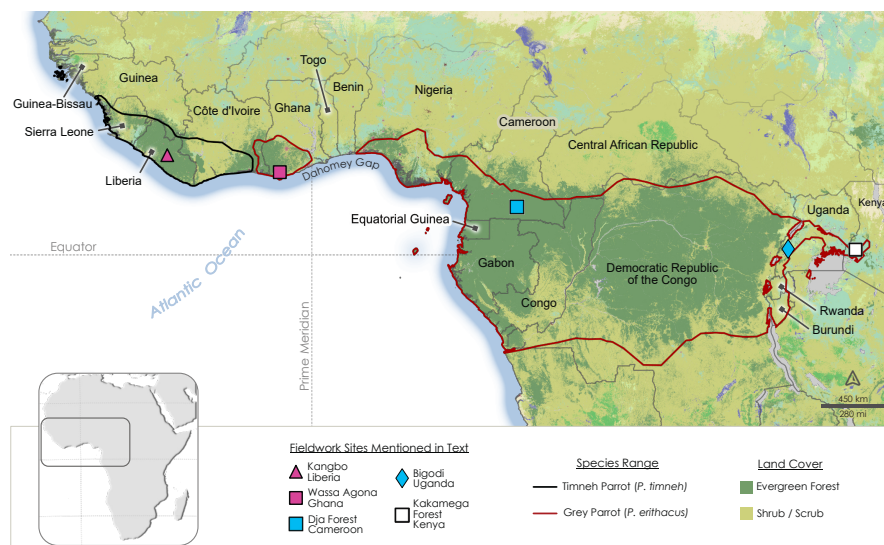


Plate 2 *Psittacus* Habitat, Lynn Carlson, Compass Cartographic

As for the name “African grey,” it is still used colloquially, but is no longer the official English name. Taxonomists now split them into two species: *Psittacus timneh*, whose English name is “the timneh parrot,” and *Psittacus erithacus*, simply called “the grey parrot” and sometimes “the Congo grey.” *P. timneh* live along the coast of far western Africa. Their territory extends from Sierra Leone in the west to Côte d’Ivoire. The range of *P. erithacus* is in two parts: an isolated patch in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, and a large area that stretches from Nigeria into the

² Nancy J. Jacobs, *Birders of Africa: History of a Network* (Yale University, 2016) Birds as actors: Samantha Gregory Rosenthal, “Life and Labor in a Seabird Colony: Hawaiian Guano Workers, 1857-70,” *Environmental History* 17, no. 4 (2012); Nancy J. Jacobs, “Herding Birds, Interspecific Communication, and Translations,” *Critical African Studies* 8 (2016); Paul R. Josephson, *Chicken: A History from Farmyard to Factory* (Polity Press, 2020); Maan Barua, “Feral Ecologies: The Making of Postcolonial Nature in London,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28, no. 3 (2022); Jack Bouchard, “Fishwork Is for the Birds: Humans and Birds in the Sixteenth-Century Northwest Atlantic,” *Environmental History* 29, no. 3 (2024).

Congo basin, with an eastern extension to Lake Victoria and the Kakamega forest in Kenya (plate 2). Because it is often impossible to differentiate between the two species in the historical record, I'll use "greys" or grey parrots as the collective name for both species in this book.³

Parrots aren't melodious singers, but they are the best mimics. Like a few other animals—songbirds, hummingbirds, bats, dolphins, and whales—parrots are vocal learners, meaning they can learn new sounds by imitating those made by others. A 2022 study documented that greys had the largest verbal repertoires of all parrots, and popular culture testifies to this understanding. It was a grey parrot who taught Doctor Dolittle to talk to animals. Three novelists of recent decades—Margaret Atwood, Michael Chabon, and Barbara Kingsolver—put speaking greys in plots about human disaster. Once I started looking, I found that greys have spoken up again and again, talking in surprisingly appropriate ways. Greys' neighbors in the forests of Cameroon have many accounts of them as truth tellers. Henry VIII had a parrot who imitated the king. Andrew Jackson's pet grey was prone to cussing. The stories continue into the twenty-first century: a Michigan grey who was present at the fatal shooting of his owner mimicked an argument concluding, in the man's voice, "Don't f---ing shoot." Some wondered whether it was admissible evidence. It was not. Parrots, Western orthodoxy and legal procedure hold, can mimic but do not understand what they are saying.⁴

A Ghanaian proverb contradicts that: "Although the parrot has never been to England, it nevertheless speaks English." This may be a commentary on the intelligence of the parrot or on the high prevalence of parrot-keeping among foreigners. In Akan material culture, chiefs' staffs sometimes feature parrots, so it could be a compliment to a leader's eloquence. In the 1980s, Ghanaian musician George Darko put this aphorism to music. The song had two lines: "Ako te Brofo ooh, Eeei eei!/ Efiri tete ako te Brofo ooh Eeei eeh!" ("The parrot can understand English. Since the ancient times, the parrot can understand English.") "Ako te Brofo" was a huge dance hit, not only in Ghana, where Twi speakers understood the words, but also in Europe, where Darko lived and recorded. The song drew a diverse audience together. The lively tune got them dancing and singing and European fans weren't bothered about not understanding the lyrics.⁵

³ Following convention, I will use the British spelling, with an "e" for the species name. When I refer to the color, I'll use the American spelling, with an "a."

⁴ Lauryn Benedict et al., "A Survey of Vocal Mimicry in Companion Parrots," *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1 (2022). In both movie versions, Polynesia is a macaw, but in the books she is an African grey: Hugh Lofting, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Frederick A. Stokes, 1922), 34. Fiction: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake: A Novel* (Nan A. Talese, 2003); Michael Chabon, *The Final Solution: A Story of the Final Solution* (Fourth Estate, 2004); Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (HarperFlamingo, 1998) Henry VIII: Francis Willughby and John Ray, *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby* (Printed by A.C. for John Martyn, 1678), 109. Jackson's funeral: S.G. Heiskell, *Andrew Jackson and Early Tennessee History*, vol 3 (Ambrose, 1921), 3, 54. Witness to murder: Peter Holley, "Their Son Was Killed. They Believe His Parrot Is Telling People Who Pulled the Trigger," *Washington Post*, 5 June, 2016.

⁵ Doran H. Ross, "The Verbal Art of Akan Linguist Staffs," *African Arts* 16, no. 1 (1982): 66; George Darko, *Ako Te Brofo* (1984), https://youtu.be/yk_T0tzFJ7w?si=4piyLQf6ckflYE0q; "George Darko to Celebrate 30 Years of 'Akoo Te Brofo'," <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/George-Darko-to-celebrate-30-years-of-Akoo-te-Brofo-250734>. I thank Kwesi Asante for the translation.

This little story is an excellent metaphor for the way sound connects parrots and people, because despite what the proverb and song lyric assert, parrots don't understand a lot of any human language. This is not to denigrate parrots; *we* don't fully understand the function of *their* vocalizations. But the shared affinity for listening and affirming what we hear allows us to connect. Our two species understand each other well enough to dance together.

Sadly, humans haven't followed an ethics of informed consent in our relationship with parrots. We have admired these wild animals so much that we put them in cages. One hundred years ago, an Englishman unapologetically justified it: "Surely a feathered race endowed with such singular powers, both of brain and voice, was not created without purpose, but intended for the delight and sometimes the solace of the human race." Human fascination with parrots has led to our domination over them, and it hasn't been good for parrots.⁶

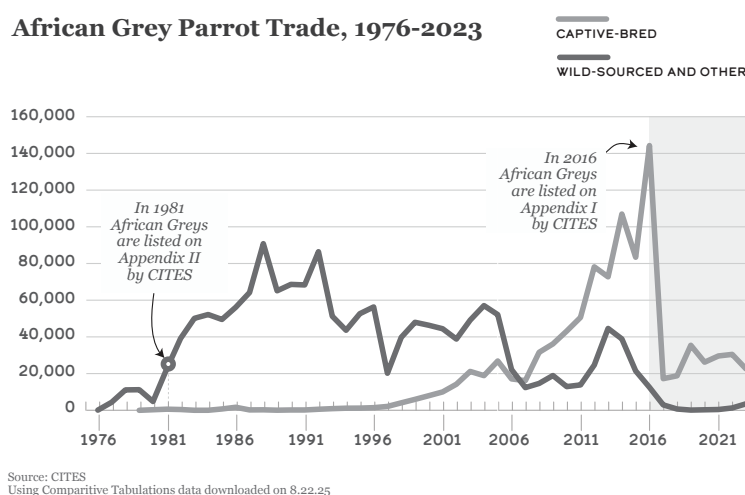


Figure 0-1 Nathan Atkinson (data) and Valerie Robbins (design). Wild-caught and captive-bred African grey parrot trade, 1976-2023, based on CITES data.

Of the 402 extant species of parrots, 29% (117) are listed as Threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and 58% (233) have declining populations. Since 2016, the IUCN has listed both species of greys as Endangered; populations have declined because of habitat conversion and the pet trade. Apportioning blame between these two factors is difficult; the loss to habitat conversion is a slow process and unquantified, but we have statistics about the pet trade. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international agreement known by the acronym CITES—pronounced “sigh-tees”—keeps records which show that 2,569,246 grey parrots were legally exported across international borders between 1976 and 2023. Of these, 1,587,796 were wild-caught and 981,450 had been bred in captivity (fig. 0-1).⁷

⁶ O.E. Cresswell, "Parrots," *Avicultural Magazine*, 1920, 145.

⁷ David Tsz Chung Chan et al., "Global Trade in Parrots – Influential Factors of Trade and Implications for Conservation," *Global Ecology and Conservation* 30 (2021). The data visualization designer Valerie Robbins and the statistician Nathan Atkinson have interpreted the CITES data, which are complex and not transparent. Data for Trade Database (Version 2025.1). Their total for wild-caught combines categories W (wild-caught), U (unknown), and N/A (blank). Their total for captive-bred combines categories C (captive-bred in accordance with CITES Resolution conf 10.16 [Rev]), D (captive-bred in accordance with Resolution Conf. 12.10 [Rev. CoP15]) and F (captive bred not in accordance with 10.16 [Rev]. See their dynamic alluvial graph which depicts export, reexport, and import from 1976 through 2023:

CITES records are imperfect. They do not count traffic to nonmember states. The number who died in capture and transit is unknown. Sometimes they report the number of permits issued rather than the number of traded individuals. CITES records do not concern individuals traded within a country's borders. For example, the number of captive birds bred in the United States is substantial and unknowable. Most importantly, enormous smuggling has been consistent and uncounted over decades. Thus, the numbers from CITES undoubtedly underestimate the effect on forest populations by several factors. I will use these numbers, but always remember that they minimize the scale of parrot loss.

Although the species are endangered their existence in cages is secure. James Gilardi, executive director of the World Parrot Trust, has estimated that as many parrots live in cages in human homes as in trees in forests. Nothing about captivity suggests it is a humane solution to species endangerment, but parrots do not suffer in silence. As pets, they are notoriously challenging. They communicate their intent and emotions. Greys make demands, and if you don't meet them, they might rip apart your woodwork, irritate your eardrums, and bite your loved ones. An unhappy parrot is a terrible pet.⁸

Some human keepers satisfy the parrots' social needs passably well. People and parrots can come to care for and respect each other. I have seen captive greys who seem adjusted and happy with human company. But many relationships are tragic mispairings. Abuse and neglect of individual pet parrots is endemic. If they're lucky, "bad" pet parrots go to sanctuaries, living detritus of the human fascination with their species. Denise Kelly, a sanctuary worker, conveyed her frustration. "What have we done to these birds? We love them because they're smart and can fly and they're free. And then we stick them in a cage and make them completely dependent on us and clip their wings and take away their ability to fly. And then when they don't meet our expectations, we want to get rid of them." When it comes to parrots, people have a lot to answer for.⁹

History Beyond the Human

Historians have traditionally specialized in people. As the French historian of the interwar years, Marc Bloch, wrote, "The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies." The mid-century English historian E.P. Thompson was explicit that the historian's quarry was exclusively human: "it is precisely the element of agency which distinguishes them from the beasts." It's unfair to point to Bloch and Thompson as evidence for narrowness in the discipline of history. Bloch had an expansive vision of what historians could know, and Thompson was determined to open the discipline up to "history from below." But even for them, nonhumans were locked outside, without intentionality, and therefore "agency."¹⁰

"African Grey Parrot Trade among the Top 15 Traders and Their Trading Partners," observingafricangreys.org.

⁸ Personal communication from James Gilardi, Executive Director, World Parrot Trust, 24 January 2023.

⁹ Laura Lafay, "Bye-Bye Birdie, Parrots' Demands Often Prompt Owners to Take Flight," *Washington Post*, 27 August, 2001.

¹⁰ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Knopf, 1953), 28; E. P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner*, 1957, 123.

Historians sometimes sidestep big philosophical questions; our concern is to figure out explanations that make sense in the stories we tell. As historians tried to parse out a consistent meaning of “agency,” they noted that many humans also lack agency according to its most vaunted explanation: intentional self-actualization. If only self-actualizing individuals made history, we would have very little of it. In fact, if we’re going to be honest about it, the self-actualizing, history-making, individual member of the human species is supported, inspired, directed, and constrained by a world of relationships, including with nonhuman animals, plants, and material entities.¹¹

Distilling these lessons, the Australian historians Emily O’Gorman and Andrea Gaynor have cautioned us to remember “the primacy of relations over entities.” This means tracing connections rather than inserting boundaries between species. This caution allows us to see how we affect each other, how we shape what the other becomes. But the type of entities still matter. Of all the possible nonhuman actors, animals are the most-straightforward and possibly the most rewarding subjects. What Mieke Roscher, André Krebber, and Brett Mizelle say about animals in general—that they present “exceptionally strong prisms for the study of history and its complexities”—is true for grey parrots. The examples and exhortations from many fine historians of animals infuse this history of grey parrots.¹²

Yet histories of animals differ from histories of people. A big difference is methodological: animals have not represented themselves in the historical record by creating texts. Still, texts are not required for historical work. As Etienne Benson has observed, traces are left to us in

¹¹ Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of social history* 37, no. 1 (2003); Lynn M. Thomas, “Historicising Agency,” *Gender & history* 28, no. 2 (2016); Linda Nash, “The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?,” *Environmental History* 10 (2005); Graeme Wynn et al., eds., *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Ohio University, 2022). Whitney Barlow Robles, “On Nonhuman Agency,” *The Journal of interdisciplinary history* 54, no. 3 (2024).

¹² Good overviews of animal and plant histories: Aaron Skabelund, “Animals and Imperialism: Recent Historiographical Trends,” *History Compass* 11, no. 10 (2013); Joshua Specht, “Animal History after Its Triumph: Unexpected Animals, Evolutionary Approaches, and the Animal Lens,” *History Compass*, July, 2016; Kathleen Cruz Gutierrez, “From Objects of Study to Worldmaking Beings: The History of Botany at the Corner of the Plant Turn,” *History Compass* 21, no. 8 (2023); Sandra Swart, *The Lion’s Historian: Africa’s Animal Past* (Ohio University Press, 2025) Stimulating research: Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Harvard University, 1987); Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (Yale University, 2008); Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Wits University, 2010); Tamara Fernando, “Seeing Like the Sea: A Multispecies History of the Ceylon Pearl Fishery 1800–1925,” *Past & Present* 254, no. 1 (2021). The debate about animals and history: Mieke Roscher et al., “Writing History after the Animal Turn? An Introduction to Historical Animal Studies,” in *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies*, ed. Roscher et al. (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021); Erica Fudge, “A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals,” in *Representing Animals*, ed. Rothfels (Indiana University, 2002); Etienne Benson, “Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace,” in *Making Animal Meaning*, ed. Kalof and Montgomery (Michigan State University, 2011); Tania Munz, “My Goose Child Martina: The Multiple Uses of Geese in the Writings of Konrad Lorenz,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 41, no. 4 (2011): 411–12; Joyce E. Chaplin, “Can the Nonhuman Speak?: Breaking the Chain of Being in the Anthropocene,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78, no. 4 (2017).

many sorts of repositories. To paraphrase the historian of ethology Tania Munz, although we cannot bypass our dependence on human observations to learn how animals once lived and breathed, it remains significant that they lived and breathed and acted meaningfully. Fortunately, because grey parrots are smart, communicative, and uninhibited—more than many animals—they make their meanings known to us.¹³

Yes, grey parrots, and other animals too, have “consciousness.” According to Donald Griffin, the pioneer of cognitive ethology, animal consciousness involves “thinking about objects and events.” It involves having feelings about these thoughts and using them to guide behavior. Anyone who knows a dog, cat, or parrot recognizes this as true. Denying animal consciousness requires willful insistence. Griffin assails this faulty logic: “The customary view of animals as always living in a state comparable to that of human sleepwalkers is a sort of negative dogmatism.” Of course, some animals are capable of more complex thought than others. But birds are not uniformly less capable than mammals. The Cambridge Definition of Consciousness, a 2012 statement by a collective of neuroscientists, singled out our subject: “Evidence of near human-like levels of consciousness has been most dramatically observed in African grey parrots.”¹⁴

We know parrots have a sense of the past. We know they have memories; they recall where the fruit is ripe, which humans have pulled out their tail feathers, what to say when the phone rings, and that imitating the smoke detector alarm provokes a strong reaction. Those who have faced captivity, re-homing, rescue, or release have a sense of rupture, and they act out their trauma.

Because parrots talk, it may seem like a golden opportunity for more-than-human oral history, but the methods for oral history among humans won’t suffice. When parrots use our words, they do not have our meanings, and their utterances using our words do not add up to a language like ours. The leading ethologist Frans de Waal, a specialist in nonhuman cognition and communication, has been explicit: “We honestly have no evidence for symbolic communication equally rich and multifunctional as ours, outside our own species.” This distinction does not, however, confirm John Locke’s idea that parrots were merely mimics of human utterances and that their vocalizations represent nothing. Parrot talk does have meaning. It serves the purpose of connecting with other parrots or expressing their desire to connect with us. That they are speaking to us means more than the individual words they say. The method for treating parrots like historical actors is to look for descriptions of what they are doing, including what they say and when they say it, and to analyze them in the light of our best understandings of their behavior.¹⁵

¹³ Benson, “Animal Writes.”; Munz, “My Goose Child Martina,” 411-12; Chaplin, “Can the Nonhuman Speak?”

¹⁴ Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* (University of Chicago, 2001), 3, 5. Consider Mary Midgley’s commonsense rebuttal to human-animal dualism: “if it were true, there would have to have been a quite advanced point in animal evolution when parents who were merely unconscious objects suddenly had a child which was a fully conscious subject. And that situation makes no sense.” Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Routledge, 2002), 152, quoted in Ingold 1983, 4.

¹⁵ Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Parrot Culture: Our 2,500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird* (University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 70-71; Frans B. M. De Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (W.W. Norton, 2016), 106.

I once owned cockatiels and budgerigars, so I have a sense of how creatures with this evolutionary profile exist in human homes, but I have never owned a large parrot. I have tried to meet as many African greys as I could. It's not hard. Many parrot owners have been open to my questions and my visits. I also interviewed volunteers and staff in sanctuaries. I know it is possible for people to adapt well enough to parrots' expectations and have a companionate relationship, although many of the most dedicated bird-keepers will say that their birds would have better lives if they were free.

The collected stories about their behavior in this book show that greys are knowledge-producing, strategic actors who practice politics and possess culture. It is a fallacy to define culture as a human transcendence of nature, thus denying that animals possess it. Yes, parrots have culture: they learn according to conventions, which they pass on to each other. Like people, parrots circulate knowledge, but in captivity, they cannot. We cannot reconstruct a body of past parrot knowledge, but by observing their actions, we can see they were learning. Parrots also practice politics: an interaction between parties with affordances, interests and strategies. They come under others' power and negotiate. Parrots do not understand everything at stake, but which humans ever managed that?¹⁶

Writing Animals into African History

This global history of grey parrots is also a history of Africa in the world. Although no parrot ever had a sense of the history of Africa and Europe, important phenomena connecting these continents--colonialism and capitalist globalization--transformed the existence of these species. This book pays a lot of attention to how the extraction of wealth from Africa set the context for the encagement of its wild grey parrots.¹⁷

Putting animal history into the context of colonialism and global capitalism may raise concerns about identifying people who were colonial subjects with animals. As the South African historian Sandra Swart has often told us, animal history is uniquely controversial among approaches to Africa's past. There are two tricky points. First, when human history is one of oppression and suffering—topics which are present in abundance in modern Africa—some people wonder how animals can even matter. Second, racist depictions of Africans deploy animal metaphors. A history that puts African people and animals in the same frame might be seen as treading perilously close to those tropes. But these problems aren't between the people and animals in Africa's past. The historical interactions existed and beg for attention. The problem is in how history is told. Histories that gloss significant differences and insist on

¹⁶ Avian cognition: Gavin R. Hunt, "Manufacture and Use of Hook-Tools by New Caledonian Crows," *Nature* 379, no. 6562 (1996); Nathan Emery, *Bird Brain: An Exploration of Avian Intelligence* (Princeton University, 2016); Anastasia Krasheninnikova et al., "Assessing African Grey Parrots' Prosocial Tendencies in a Token Choice Paradigm," *Royal Society Open Science* 6, no. 12 (2019); Thomas R. Zentall, "Revisited: Pigeons Have Much Cognitive Behavior in Common with Humans," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020). A history including what animals also knew: Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait*, First edition. ed (W.W. Norton & Company, 2019)

¹⁷ Nancy J. Jacobs, "Europe, Africa, and the Birds between Them," in *Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire: New Views on Environmental History*, ed. Beattie et al. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

either-or interpretations simply aren't good histories. Fortunately, there are ways to write good histories about what has connected and distinguished people and animals in Africa's past.¹⁸

Critical race theory, that bogeyman of right-wing and even centrist US politics, is helpful in letting a historian see the past in new ways. I have learned from the many thinkers who have exposed the racist suppositions underlying the category of the human. Thinkers as influential as Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and Achille Mbembe have written of alternative nonracist multispecies ontologies. The field of literary criticism has produced especially rich analyses. Of these, I have found Bénédicte Boisseron's writings, which model antiracist animal studies, to be most generative. Her objections to comparisons of animal and human suffering and to instrumentalist borrowings of anti-racist outrage to stoke arguments for animal rights are essential.¹⁹

I am a white historian with roots in liberal politics and the field of African Studies in the twentieth century. I have listened to the powerful critiques of the silences and racism in my field. Without denying them, my response has been to affirm the potential of the discipline of history as a critical, evidence-based, reflective, and socially connected field. At their best, historians use incomplete and problematic evidence to construct analyses in the form of narratives. They know that power relations of the past have shaped the archives that are available to us. Existing records are not neutral, but still we can use them to understand more about the past. Historians read against the grain and with it. When they are unsure, they go out and find more evidence (and then some more). Good historical narratives will respect the specificity of the past and address the challenges of our present. Good historical narratives will not instrumentalize anyone's suffering.²⁰

The Research Process

¹⁸ Swart, *Lion's Historian*. Other histories of animals in Africa: Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford University, 2014); Julie Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa* (Duke University, 2019); Saheed Aderinto, *Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa: The Human and Nonhuman Creatures of Nigeria* (Ohio University, 2022); Stephanie Zehnle, "War and Wilderness: The Sokoto Jihad and its Animal Discourse," *Critical African Studies* 8, no. 2 (2016); John Heydinger, "Human-Lion Conflict and the Reproduction of White Supremacy in Northwest Namibia," *African Studies Review* 64, no. 4 (2021); Peter Heywood, *The Life, Extinction, and Rebreeding of Quagga Zebras: Significance for Conservation* (Cambridge University Press, 2022)

¹⁹ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W W Norton, 2020); Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York University, 2020); Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020); Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (Columbia University, 2018) I recommend the coda to Boisseron's book, which is an extended ethical query, with no easy resolution. Another caution about the impossibility of stepping away from structural advantages with lifestyle choices: Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War against Animals* (Brill, 2015), 31.

²⁰ The coloniality of history: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995) The reflection on the field of history that inspires me: Joyce Oldham Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth About History*, 1st ed (Norton, 1994)

In more ways than one, it was a challenge to get close enough to greys to see them well. Other historians' work has greatly aided my search for this species' history. In the early 2000s, the English literature scholar Bruce Boehrer and the cultural critic Paul Carter gave us very different accounts of parrots in Western culture. Marcy Norton, a specialist in the Hispanic Atlantic, recently provided foundational work on the multi-species cultures of early modern indigenous America. These books helped me understand historical representations of parrots and envision them as subjects.²¹

But I was looking for one kind of parrot and intent on grounding its history in Africa. This was daunting. There is no traditional archive that houses records of parrots' past. For the earliest past, there was no writing at all. Before the nineteenth century, Europeans recorded early encounters with greys in travelers' accounts and scientific writings. But we shouldn't take their assertions at face value. Publications focused specifically on African greys only after the nineteenth century. Faced with these challenges, I drew inspiration from my two fields of specialization—African and environmental history—which have refused to allow a lack of official archives to block their practitioners from thinking about the past.²²

Fortunately, the Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL), a project of the Smithsonian Institution, provided many sources. By making old scientific writings, travelers' accounts, and hobbyist writings available, the BHL and other electronic databases like the Internet Archive allowed a critical reconstruction of the past of this species. These materials are now readily accessible and keyword searchable in digital form.

Reading documents against the grain was necessary but not sufficient to construct this history. The greatest body of knowledge about wild grey parrots exists among their human neighbors in the African tropical forest. Living with parrots in the trees above, they know a lot about the birds' behavior and calls. But it's hard for someone based in the United States to access what Africans know about animals. Despite everything vernacular knowledge has to offer, it hasn't easily made the jump to global dissemination. To connect to a sampling of knowledge, I transported myself to find the knowledge holders. To learn about the parrots, I made several visits to forests: Kakamega in Kenya in 2016; the Dja Forest in Cameroon in 2017; southern Ghana in 2019, 2022, and 2024; the area around the Kibale National Park in Uganda in 2022, 2024, and 2025, and Rivercess County in southeastern Liberia in 2024. In 2017, I also traveled to South Africa, far away from greys' natural habitat, because it has the world's largest parrot breeding industry.²³

²¹ Boehrer, *Parrot Culture*; Paul Carter, *Parrot* (Reaktion, 2005); Marcy Norton, *The Tame and the Wild: People and Animals after 1492* (Harvard University, 2023)

²² An introduction to method in African history: Thomas T. Spear, *Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa* (Longman, 1981) Observations that animals were all over the colonial archive, once historians paid attention: Jonathan Saha, *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 12; Aderinto, *Animality and Colonial Subjecthood*, 21.

²³ The circulation of science: Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Harvard University, 1987). Histories of science in Africa: Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (University Press of Virginia, 2001); Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Jacobs, *Birders of Africa*; Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (The MIT Press, 2012)

I gained my best sense of everyday parrot knowledge in Somalomo, Cameroon, a small settlement on the border of the Dja Faunal Reserve, which hosts the UCLA Congo Basin Institute, where I was affiliated. Working with the assistance of Romeo Kamta Tchoffo and aided by my brother David Jacobs, I conducted interviews about grey parrots. Several people with forest experience were kind enough to distill their observations for me. They told me how their ancestors had lived with grey parrots. They knew a lot about living parrots, too. This book draw on that knowledge.²⁴

Beyond those weeks of fieldwork in the forest, I relied on specialists who generously shared their experience and data. Time in the car with Simon Tamungang, a Cameroonian ornithologist, and Nathaniel Annorbah, a Ghanaian ecologist, amounted to personalized seminars in parrot ecology and history. Simon and Nat introduced me to trappers and traders, who know a lot about parrots. My conversations with them were complicated by a recent change in international law. When I was in Cameroon in 2017, the trade had become illegal only the year before. I assured the trappers and traders that I was not with law enforcement and some talked with me, but they were cautious.

Although I attempted to receive clearance through the Brown University office overseeing research with human subjects, I was told they do not offer institutional review to historians, even if they want it. So, I resolved to follow practices recommended by the Oral History Association. This meant affirming the importance of consent. When asking for interviews, I explained that I was writing a history book and asked if they would be willing to help my research. I only talked to those who said they understood and agreed to participate. However, because it was impossible for me to receive clearance for a protocol, I have been conservative with my use of these interviews. I mask the identity of the people I talked to in South Africa, where the parrot breeding business is ongoing. I do not mask the identity of trappers in Ghana because the men I talked to were already identified in an earlier study. The people in Cameroon and Uganda who shared their observations of parrots were not saying anything controversial and I cite them by name to honor their knowledge.²⁵

During the course of this research, I became opposed to the parrot trade. So, talking with trappers and traders felt awkward. Sometimes, a grey was caged nearby, freshly extracted from the forest to spend the rest of their life in captivity. As much as I regretted parrot trafficking, as a social scientist I resolved to avoid the imperial trope of African hunters as “poachers.” To mitigate that, I consider the parrot trade in the context of African economic history. So, my conversations with the trappers and traders were more about their businesses than their relations with parrots.

This was a different sort of research from reading historical documents on a laptop in my living room, but on every trip, I engaged with people a lot more than with birds. Even when I went to Africa, the parrots remained distant. To improve my understanding of parrot communities and culture, I turned to the scientific fields of ethology and behavioral ecology, which have contributed different insights than what I learned from people in the forest. Irene Pepperberg’s

²⁴ Nancy J. Jacobs, "Saturday Morning's Politics of Seeing," *Seeing the Woods: A Blog by the Rachel Carson Center* (blog), 29 January, 2018, <https://seeingthewoods.org/2018/01/29/saturday-mornings-politics-of-seeing/>.

²⁵ Gottlieb Dändliker, *The Grey Parrot in Ghana: A Population Survey, a Contribution to the Biology of the Species, a Study of its Commercial Exploitation and Management Recommendations*, 1992, A report on CITES project S-30.

career with Alex was groundbreaking. But her research was confined to an American laboratory. Other researchers set up where the wild birds are: among keas and kākās in New Zealand; cockatoos in Australia; and conures and parrotlets in Central and South America. Yet, few worked in Africa, where the disparity in how well the birds moved and how well people could follow them created a barrier to research. Unfortunately, formal observations of the *Psittacus* genus in their native forests are extremely scant. What about African scientists, aren't they observing the parrots? The sad fact of scientific research in Africa is that, unless it is applied in some way that contributes to conservation or development, it will probably not receive funding. African scientists who want to do basic biological research—including on behavioral ecology—will not find as much support as their colleagues' applied research on conservation. African scientists have studied parrot ecologies, but not often their behavior in the wild.²⁶

In the absence of studies about greys' behavior, we can look to other parrots, because even as their evolution diverged, parrots all over the world have retained common characteristics. We know from phylogenetic evidence that the closest relatives to greys are African parrots of the *Poicephalus* genus, including the Cape parrot and Senegal parrot, and the next closest are neotropical (American) macaws, conures, and amazons. The provisional reconstruction of the grey community in chapter 1 draws heavily on ethological and behavioral ecological findings about other parrots. I use them the way historians use contemporary cultural theory to frame religious beliefs, economic behavior, or sexual practice of the past.²⁷

This is also a transnational history and ample documentation on parrots came from literate Europeans and North Americans who kept them in their homes. Parrot keepers published anecdotes about their birds and memoirs of their lives with them. Hobbyist handbooks, magazines, and veterinary writing on parrot health and welfare provided insight into human-parrot politics. In the late twentieth century, as the disaster of mass parrot keeping became clear, these writers wrote in advocacy of neglected pets and described their efforts to rescue them. Pet owners in many countries, including in Africa, talked to me. This body of knowledge was essential in helping me understand the character of grey parrots.

²⁶ Applied and basic biological research in Africa: John B Amuno, "Interview," interview by Jacobs, 12 June, 2022. Amuno has published on behavior in the wild: John B. Amuno et al., "Abundance, Movements and Habitat Use by African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) in Budongo and Mabira Forest Reserves, Uganda," 78 (2007); John B. Amuno et al., "Some Observations on Nesting African Grey Parrots, *Psittacus erithacus*, in Uganda," *Rivista Italiana di Ornitologia* 80 (2010).

²⁷ Overviews of parrot cognition: Catherine Toft and Timothy Wright, *Parrots of the Wild: A Natural History of the World's Most Captivating Birds* (University of California, 2015); Alan B. Bond and Judy Diamond, *Thinking Like a Parrot: Perspectives from the Wild* (University of Chicago, 2019) Animal cognition is the subject of many high-quality trade books: Jennifer Ackerman, *The Genius of Birds* (Penguin Press, 2016); Ed Yong, *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms around Us* (Random House, 2022) Ethology in the history of animals: Éric Baratay, "Constructing an Animal History," in *Rethinking Nature*, ed. McCalman et al. (Routledge, 2017). Histories of the scientific fields of ethology and behavioral ecology: Richard W. Burkhardt, *Patterns of Behavior: Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, and the Founding of Ethology* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); Erika Lorraine Milam, *Creatures of Cain: The Hunt for Human Nature in Cold War America* (Princeton University, 2019); Erika Lorraine Milam, "Landscapes of Time: Building Long-Term Perspectives in Animal Behavior," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 45, no. 1-2 (2022).

Once you start looking for greys in Europe, North America, or South Africa, you're going to find plenty of them. In Providence, for years I passed one every morning on my way to the bus. A well-adjusted grey lives in a plant shop in Pawtucket. Friends in Worcester and the woman who cut my hair had them. When I was in Montreal, I had coffee with a parrot and their person. When I had a flat tire in the Lake District in England, we met a grey by the side of the road. Their person said that the shepherds complained about the bird imitating their whistling because it threw off the dogs.

But in the forests of West and Central Africa, where the parrots are supposed to live, it was hard to see them. I found lots of people who told me about parrots, but I did not see many. There were none to be found in Kenya. In northwest Cameroon, going near the Nigerian border where many lived, was considered too risky. In the Dja forest, I saw parrots high in the sky, flying above us. In Ghana, they were rare and I saw them only once, also flying high and away. After hearing so many stories, reading so many articles, and seeing so many individuals living under human control, the species still felt remote to me. So, in 2022 I wrote to Rowan Martin, Director of the Africa Region for the World Parrot Trust and asked, "Where's the best place to see greys up close?" He directed me to Bigodi, Uganda, to the edge of the Kibale National Park, to learn from the parrot watcher and professional bird guide, Nick Byaba.

In Uganda, the parrots' favorite tree, the oil palm, grows in farmers' fields but not in the forest, so the parrots come to human places. Nick brought us to a tree known as Rose's OP 2, which was close enough to a village to hear the church music and crying babies. There, I finally saw a small flock, no larger than ten, of grey parrots. They were eating, perching, preening, and resting. Bigodi has not been a regular site of parrot trapping, so they fly unmolested between Kibale National Park and the farms near town. For a few days, I witnessed the convivial co-existence I had only theorized as a historical phenomenon. Under that tree, listening to Nick's interpretations of what the birds were doing, I felt a connection between what I had learned from people living in the Dja forest in Cameroon and from scientific writings. These busy, interactive, and aware creatures enlivened the understanding I had constructed from others' stories, records, and scientific theories. I developed some confidence about explaining what they brought to their lives in cages. Finally, I had a sense of the world they inhabit if people let them stay in the forest. That lesson intensified on my visit to Kangbo village in Liberia, where the graduate student ornithologist Andrew Gweh and his professor Benedictus Freeman led us to one of the largest remaining roosts on the continent. In Uganda, Cameroon, and Liberia, I saw that most people have only incidental relations with parrots; many are indifferent. This observation prevents us from slotting Africans into conservationist morality tales, one way or the other. When we do not depict Africans as conservation heroes or villains, this becomes a history of real and ordinary people, who might agree they can co-exist with parrots.²⁸

Traveling to see African greys and talk to people, spending time in libraries and research institutions in the U.S. and Europe, has been a privilege. The affordances available to me allowed me to set wide parameters to this research. The positioning that allows me to conduct this research is built on a world of privilege, resources, connections, and the generosity of others. It's easy, though, to normalize all this with the assumption that I as a researcher am an autonomous individual, that I have achieved the research that led to this book. The narrative that follows is told in my voice, but this book draws on the expertise of so many others. It

²⁸ Patrick Ssentongo, "Kyamukama: Ex-Poacher Who Hunted Hunters Rests," *Sunday Monitor*, 4 August, 2024; Charlotte Beauvoisin, "Sunbird Hill Kibale Forest Edge," *The Eye Magazine*, 17 June, 2022.

might be said that by repeating what others have said, I am “parroting them.” I would be happy to be associated with parrots in this way. They listen to what others say and repeat it to make social contact. I hope I can do the same, connect with my readers around this analysis of the past and put them into conversation with those who have taught me. Of course, the errors I make of fact and interpretation are not those of the people I learned from. I am responsible for my errors and I ask that readers take my effort in good faith.

This Book

The Global Grey Parrot unfolds in four sections, with chapters defined around chronology, location, and theme. The first section of the book, “The Grey Parrot in the African Forest,” considers greys in their native habitat, in the broad period of the late Holocene. In human time that is roughly until around 1500, although continuities endure until today. In Section two, “The Grey Parrot as Captive,” the African grey becomes the global grey parrot. It is set in Africa, Europe, and the Americas during the early modern era. The third section of the book, “The Grey Parrot as Commodity” explains the long history of trading wild-caught birds and the short but intense history of commercial production of captive-bred chicks. The fourth section of the book, “Sanctuary in the Anthropocene,” offers a story of people caring for grey parrots in a human-dominated world, in both human homes and the parrots’ native forests. Prologues at the beginning of each section lay out key concepts underlying the analysis; they explain how ideas that don’t on the face of them have to do with parrots underlie history. If you aren’t interested in academic concepts, skip the prologues and turn to the chapters themselves, which are about the greys.

In the chapters that follow, I track the grey parrot through time and across continents by listening to stories, parsing documents, and consulting scientists. As both a birder and a historian, I have found that the parrots are elusive. It’s ironic that I was trying to near them as I was learning that people should stay farther away. When I have come close, as in that park in Providence in 2014, I have seen not only the parrots but also our domination of them. The history of grey parrots starts with humans who kept their distance—Africans who shared the forest with them—but the past 500 years show people coming much too close. People want to close the distance because they love parrots! But that love doesn’t do the parrots much good. This history reads as a tragedy—humans harming what they desire. As I end this research, I hope that we can restore the distance between our species and theirs. For them, it’s better we see them flying high overhead, or hear them calling from over the treetops just as they pass out of view.