



Missing Links: The African and American Worlds of R. L. Garner, Primate Collector (Race in the Atlantic World, 1700-1900 Ser.)

Jeremy Rich

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Jeremy Rich uses the eccentric life of R. L. Garner (1848–1920) to examine the commercial networks that brought the first apes to America during the Progressive Era, a critical time in the development of ideas about African wildlife, race, and evolution.

Garner was a self-taught zoologist and atheist from southwest Virginia. Starting in 1892, he lived on and off in the French colony of Gabon, studying primates and trying to engage U.S. academics with his theories. Most prominently, Garner claimed that he could teach apes to speak human languages and that he could speak the languages of primates. Garner brought some of the first live primates to America, launching a traveling demonstration in which he claimed to communicate with a chimpanzee named Susie. He was often mocked by the increasingly professionalized scientific community, who were wary of his colorful escapades, such as his ill-fated plan to make a New York City socialite the queen of southern Gabon, and his efforts to convince Thomas Edison to finance him in Africa.

Yet Garner did influence evolutionary debates, and as with many of his era, race dominated his thinking. Garner's arguments—for example, that chimpanzees were more loving than Africans, or that colonialism constituted a threat to the separation of the races—offer a fascinating perspective on the thinking and attitudes of his times. *Missing Links* explores the impact of colonialism on Africans, the complicated politics of buying and selling primates, and the popularization of biological racism.

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