

Abstract

Dangerous Intersubjectivities from Dionysos to Kanzi

by Louise Westling, University of Oregon

In the midst of what Elizabeth Kolbert has called the Sixth Extinction, we face an urgent need for a reevaluation of our relationships with other animals, with whom we will share an uncertain fate on a radically diminished planet. Can we learn to live together in this future, or will humans destroy most other animals and thus probably ourselves? Euripides's ancient tragedy depicts catastrophe caused by arrogant refusal to appreciate the intertwining of humans with the wild forces and creatures represented by the god Dionysos, and Darwin also called attention to the close relationships between humans and other animals. Nevertheless, species arrogance and indifference to all other life continues to lead *homo sapiens* to overwhelm and destroy wild communities and landscapes all over the planet. This paper will examine both the common semiotic scaffolding that links our biology and behavior with those of other animals, but also the differences that must be respected as habitats shrink and climate change caused by human activity forces migrations, extinctions, and radically different interspecies relationships. I will focus specifically on efforts to create "bi-cultural" spaces and "enlightened" zoos where humans and other primates such as chimpanzees and bonobos can learn to "talk" and cooperate. The work of primatologists Frans de Waal, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, and Frances White will be placed in dialogue with Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" and Karen Joy Fowler's novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*.