


Judith Masters 1955–2022 and Fabien Génin 1971–2022

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In early October 2022 Judith Masters, together with her partner and close collaborator Fabien Génin, died during a robbery of their home in South Africa's Eastern Cape, at the tragically early ages of 67 and 51. This awful random event deprived evolutionary primatology both of a mid-career researcher reaching the top of his game, and of an established and perennially challenging intellectual presence it was lucky to have and could ill afford to lose.

Judith Masters was born in 1955 in the provincial South African port city of East London. She began her academic studies at Natal University in nearby Durban, but rapidly switched to Johannesburg's

Witwatersrand University ("Wits") where she was influenced by the iconoclastic Hugh Patterson, originator of the then-radical "Recognition Concept" of species. She rapidly gravitated toward the evolutionary and systematic rethinking that was in full ferment at the time, and energetically began applying the new perspective to the nocturnal bushbabies that are widely distributed across the African continent. In rapidly becoming South Africa's premier expert on these strepsirhine primates, she opened the door for them to be viewed not as marginalized relicts of the past, but as a thriving and diversifying division of the primate order: an achievement in which she took great satisfaction. When she began, the bushbabies were thought to comprise five species, crammed into the single genus *Galago*; now, some 19 bushbaby species are recognized, spread across six genera, one of which (*Paragalago*) Judith herself named, in collaboration with colleagues.

During the early days, when an impressive stream of practical taxonomic contributions, regularly interspersed with provocative reconsiderations of theory, might have been expected to lead to rapid professional advancement, Judith also courageously spoke out against apartheid. Her very first publications, in 1986 issues of *New Scientist* and *Nature*, were titled, "How can scientists help to end apartheid?" and "New idea on South Africa," and after-hours she taught hugely popular unofficial biology classes in the crowded townships. Unsurprisingly, such activities did nothing to endear her to the powers that were. She found herself consigned to a dingy Wits basement lab, in which she and her shortly-to-be-deported English then-husband routinely found themselves showered with soot blown in from the crematorium next door. It was not until 1998, after she had served a hugely formative 2-year postdoc at Harvard with Richard Lewontin, that she was appointed Assistant Director at Pietermaritzburg's Natal Museum. In 2006, she moved to a Professorship of Zoology at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape, where she established the very active research group known as the African Primate Initiative for Ecology and Speciation (APIES). While there she also cofounded the Primate Ecology and Genetics Group and the multidisciplinary think-tank known as Africa Earth Observation Network (AEON), and chose to live in the

remote village of Hogsback, where she took delight in being in the semi-wild among baboons, samangos, and vervet monkeys.

In 2008, Judith was joined at APIES by the Toulouse-born biologist Fabien Génin, who had lately received his PhD at the University of Paris for a dissertation on mouse lemurs. He had been appointed a Senior Lecturer at Fort Hare, a location that placed him close to the Indian Ocean and the island of Madagascar, home of the lemurs. At the time of Fabien's arrival Judith had already embarked on a collaboration with the South African geologist Maarten de Wit that was aimed at clarifying both the geological history of Madagascar and the biogeographical origins of the lemurs and the Malagasy biota as a whole. This new focus had naturally spurred in her an interest in the entire strepsirhine fauna: an interest that dovetailed nicely with Fabien's own agenda, embracing as it did aspects of lemur speciation, bioacoustics, physiology, and energetics. Well before Maarten's death in 2020, Judith had rejected the notion that the ancestral lemur(s) had rafted across the Mozambique Channel. She initially flirted with the idea of a possible origin from India, but the picture radically changed when geological data from coring in the Mozambique Channel began to indicate that highly intermittent Cenozoic land bridging of some kind between Africa and Madagascar might have occurred. During the last 4 years of their lives, Judith and Fabien were actively investigating not only the potential mechanics of the geodispersal of mammals from Africa to Madagascar that this new possibility raised, but how such a mechanism might be reconciled both with the complex structure of the modern Malagasy biota and with evolutionary processes in general. It is a huge loss to science that they have been deprived of the opportunity to fully follow through on these explorations.

Throughout her time at Fort Hare Judith maintained an active engagement with the primatological community not just in South Africa but worldwide, hosting an annual meeting of South African primate researchers and students, and conducting numerous international collaborations. One particularly memorable combination of these two kinds of activity resulted in the *Prosimians 2007 International Congress* that Judith and Fabien organized in the glorious Ithala Game Reserve, southeast of Johannesburg (and that they published in the landmark book *Leaping Ahead*, co-edited with Marco Gamba). The fourth in a series of conferences held since 1972, this was perhaps the most fun event of its kind that we can remember—though woe betide anyone whose presentation showed any signs of sloppy thinking when Judith was in the chair! Judith always held herself and everyone else to the highest of scientific standards, and she rarely let any lapses slip by, despite a warm sense of humor and a sly sense of irony. At the time of her death Judith was actively preparing a bid to host a future meeting of the International Primate Society at a venue in Durban, so primatologists who relish a stimulating conference have additional reason to mourn her untimely passing.

Tireless as her devotion was to primates, evolutionary biology, and her students, Judith also knew how to enjoy her life to the full, and somehow found the time to do so. It was inevitable that her horizons would occasionally be sullied by the frustrations that were felt by many academic women of her generation, not only in the

stifling patriarchy of the Old South Africa, but also in the scientific enterprise more generally. And it was particularly galling to a woman of Judith's exceptional intellectual qualities to feel that she had to fight an uphill battle merely to be taken seriously. But she refused to be deterred, and in retrospect we can see that in the long run she won most of her scholarly battles, even if she was sometimes less successful with obtuse university bureaucrats. Most importantly, though, she rarely let her numerous professional frustrations impede her appreciation of the better things in life. Like Fabien she was both a genial and stimulating colleague, and a wonderful companion, never happier than when discussing science and the vagaries of life over a glass (or three) of decent wine—ideally in her beloved Italy, and when the curtain was soon to rise on *La Bohème*.

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