

Familiarity

Alice Walker's Vision of Kinship Across Gender, Race & Species

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The field of human-animal studies has developed by exploring the meanings and realities of “relations between” what we call humans and animals. Whether the context is individual, familial or social, economic, cultural, politico-ethical, psychological, geographical, historical, creative-representational or otherwise, a consistent fascination for scholars developing the field has been making sense of humans’ encounters and interactions with nonhuman others. Certainly, many have responded to the compelling injunction to take seriously the manifold differences and heterogeneities that run athwart the animal realm, and to thereby recognise that “the human” is but one form of life among many. This is, we might say, a denial of human exceptionalism. And yet the field, given licence even by this approach, continuously re-establishes the force and meaningfulness of difference at the level of *species* in its ongoing fascination with “human-animal relations”. This is precisely the force and the meaningfulness that gives shape to a notion that the historian of ideas Tom Tyler suggests is, alongside human exceptionalism, the second key element of anthropocentrism: anthroponormativity. This term, for Tyler, describes the complementary ideas that humans are the standard for viewing the world and that “we” humans must view “ourselves” as members of a unified human community. How, then, to escape such anthroponormativity?

Indeed, what could a notion of kinship be—what does it look like, or feel like? what are its stories?—that does not so much cross as obliterate bodily distinctions as reasonable delimiters of community, sociality, friendship, familiarity? This is a question concerning which those of us trying to make sense of “the animal”, of “animals” and of “animality”—and of the demands that living well on the planet with animals places on us—still have much to learn. My position in this paper is that we can do so by engaging in the well-established and on-going debates in gender, postcolonial and critical race studies about the peculiar force and signification that *embodiment* holds—in terms of justice, of identity, of any life lived. To highlight just one of the issues in play here, how does one balance these two competing demands: on the one hand, the liberatory appeal of *refusing* those categories (let us say gender or race) that have undergirded legacies of oppression, in part by forming subjects into normalised shapes of cultural embodiment; and, on the other, the determination to *remember* and attend to the meanings of that lived embodiment in all its divisive inequality. The aim of this paper is to explore this and related questions that put issues of race, gender and species into critical conversation.

I want to return to the writing of the American novelist and social activist Alice Walker, in particular her novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and the provocative and committed non-fiction essays “Everything Is a Human Being” (1983) “Am I Blue?” (1986) and “Why Did the Balinese Chicken Cross the Road?” (1987) that presage it. These and other writings ensured that Walker was, without doubt, the highest-profile writer of literature to be thinking seriously about kinship with animals in the late 1990s when “animal studies” was initially developing. And yet I say “return” because Walker is now rarely if ever engaged as a thinker on these questions. In part, I will suggest, this is because of the dearth of interest, until recently, in animal studies, in the complex and difficult inter-relation of the issues of species, race, animality and blackness—and the intersection of these with issues of gender. This is precisely the zone of inquiry in which Walker works. This paper revisits Walker’s writing in the context of recent scholarship in critical race studies—by thinkers such as Benedicte Boisseron, Claire Jean Kim, Lindgren Johnson and Alexander Weheliye—that reads across the tense and conflicted politics, moralities, histories and representational complexities of species, gender and race. In particular, my interest is not so much showing how Walker articulates what Kim calls a “multi-optic critique” of the intersecting institutions of racism, speciesism and sexism; rather, I aim to delineate the affirmative character of other-than-human “familiarity” that Walker proposes, in pains-taking dissidence against