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Race Matters, Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1838-1934 (Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture)

Lindgren Johnson

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This book challenges the grand narrative of African American studies: that African Americans rejected racist associations of blackness and animality through a disassociation from animality. Taking an animal studies approach to texts written by Frederick Douglass, Charles Chesnutt, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and James Weldon Johnson, among others (and analyzing such ephemera as slaughterhouse blueprints, hunting photographs, sheep husbandry manuals, and "big game" taxidermy along the way), Johnson argues instead that this literature, at pivotal moments, reconsiders and recuperates discourses of animality (and often animals themselves) weaponized against African Americans, thus undermining the binaries that produced racial?and animal?injustice. Johnson articulates a theory of "fugitive humanism" in which black relations with animals flee both white and human exceptionalism, even as they move within and seek out a (revised) humanist space. The focus, for example, is not on how African Americans shake off animal associations in demanding recognition of their humanity, but how they hold fast to animality and animals in making such a move, revising "the human" itself as they go.

Fugitive humanism reveals how an interspecies ethics emerges in the African American response to violent dehumanization. Illuminating those moments in which the African American canon exceeds human exceptionalism, the book ultimately shows how these varied black engagements with animals and animality do not emerge out of efforts for racial justice?as a mere extension of the abolitionist or anti-lynching movements?but, to the contrary, are integral to those movements. Such a temporality offers a genuinely new approach to both the racial justice movement and the animal justice movement as it anticipates and even critiques the valuable critical insights that animal studies and posthumanism have to offer in our current moment.

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