ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of Alice Walker’s novel The Temple of My Familiar. It critiques the claim that humans’ ability to use language, regarded in this article as equivalent to one sense of the word representation, marks the essential difference of humans from animals. The argument has two stages. The first claims that the novel offers a way to bridge this supposed fundamental difference in order that representation, in a second sense of speaking or advocating for animals, can effectively occur. Importantly, the context of this is Walker’s anti-oppressive politics of race and gender. It analyzes the portrayal of characters who understand their lives, the past, and their relationships with nonhuman animals by creating myths and stories, rather than via conventional written history. The second stage of the argument shows that this essentially creative understanding of worldviews other than the “norm” of western culture transcends the distance that language is said to insinuate between humans and animals. Creative, imaginative understanding allows humans to get close to animals.

“Can one speak of the animal? Can one approach the animal?” (Derrida, 1997, p. 271)

It is generally taken for granted that in the real world - that is, outside of imaginative or literary creations - nonhuman animals do not speak. Even in classic fictional examples of talking animals such as Aesop’s Fables or The Jungle Book it is easily understood that animals are simply voicing human ideas...
and concerns and are certainly in no sense speaking for themselves. Despite research on chimpanzees’ use of sign language and even if we allow that animals can communicate to us some elemental needs or wishes, it is usually agreed that real communication between humans and animals, such as on the level that occurs when one human speaks to another, is impossible. That is to say, humans’ use of language separates them from other animals. Or, more precisely, with their lack of language animals must always be thought of as at a distance from humans in a way that humans are not separated from one another.

Lippit (2000) demonstrates clearly the strength with which this latter conviction has been held in the history of ideas. In a comprehensive survey of notions of “the animal” in the history of western philosophy, he describes the latter’s overwhelming conclusion that although a human being “can project anthropomorphic characteristics onto the animal or experience emotions (such as pathos or sympathy) in response to its being, an impenetrable screen-language - divides the loci of human and animal being” (Lippit, p. 179).

This seemingly uncontentious theory is familiar outside philosophy as the taboo on anthropomorphism in scientific reports on animal behavior. It is iterated clearly by a character in Alice Walker’s novel The Temple of My Familiar: “The animals can remember. . . . But our language they will never speak; not from lack of intelligence, but from the different construction of their speaking apparatus. In the world of man, someone must speak for them” (Walker, 1990, p. 226). In the ensuing analysis, I will examine the basis and many implications of this assertion through the ways in which animals might be said to be “spoken for” in and by Walker’s novel.

To attempt a speaking for animals, The Temple of My Familiar repeatedly strains, and indeed conclusively breaks, the limits of what we might think of as a realistic description of the world. Specifically, Walker’s novel often engages in a sort of creative myth-making, in which, for example, the story of Genesis is rewritten through the narrative of one of the book’s main protagonists, Lissie, who is quoted above. Walker’s myth writing is profoundly anti-realist and shifts her novel from the genre of realism into that of fantasy or fantastic literature. Braendlin (1996) quotes Rosemary Jackson’s description of the political motivation that often lies behind a writer’s choice to step out-
side conventional reality: “the fantastic traces the unseen and unsaid of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (p. 54). Thus, the genre of fantasy is particularly appealing to the writer who sees the hugely influential human-created narratives by which our world is understood as suppressing other more politically desirable ones. For Walker, the story of Genesis is just such a narrative, and so this ability to speak the unspoken is perhaps the clearest reason why the fantastic mode is employed to “speak for animals.” In my analysis of the novel, though, I will explain that Walker’s use of the fantastic genre and rewriting of Genesis lies fundamentally in her desire to reverse the direction of human development as Genesis describes it, the direction away from animals. Rather than insisting on their separation, then, Walker takes her characters and readers toward a closeness to animals.

**Rewriting Genesis: Representing Animals in *The Temple of My Familiar***

Since this article includes much discussion about “the representation of animals,” it will serve well at the outset to analyze a section of *The Temple of My Familiar* that stages - in relation to animals - the two-sided concept of representation, as I will be using it here. I will use “representation” in two senses: (a) presenting phenomena by means of words or images that act as symbols for the things they represent - the word “dog,” or an image of a dog, represents a particular species of furry animal or individual of that species - and (b) acting as a proxy, or advocate for another, in the sense that lawyers represent their clients. These two senses of representation might be helpfully understood as (a) “speaking about”; and (b) “speaking for.”

The scene that stages the concept of representation involves two of the novel’s central characters: Suwelo, a middle-aged African-American professor of history is listening to the voice of Lissie, a remarkable old woman of the same ethnicity whom Suwelo comes to view as a wise mentor and guide. Lissie describes from memory one of her many past lives that have taken place from prehistory to recent centuries and in which her race, gender, and even species are not fixed. She has been variously white, male and, in one instance, a lion. These past lives can be seen as Walker’s rewritings of the stories and creation-myths, particularly the book of Genesis, through which Judeo-Christian
culture came to understand its own origins. Lissie describes a particularly distant past life as a white boy approaching adulthood and living with his mother and the other women in a sexually segregated black tribe. Importantly, Lissie notes that in this lifetime humans and animals formed part of the same community:

In the days of which I am speaking, people met other animals in much the same way people today meet each other. You were sharing the same neighbourhood after all. You used the same water, you ate the same foods, you sometimes found yourself peering out of the same cave waiting for a downpour to stop. (Walker, 1990, p. 393)

Furthermore, the women of the tribe were accompanied by “familiars”: companion animals of a special kind - reminiscent of the oft-described witch’s familiar and contrasted specifically with contemporary “pets” (Walker, 1990, p. 138). They live entirely independently from, yet enjoy a relationship of reciprocal physical and emotional care with their human companions. Lissie’s mother in this past life had an adult lion named Husa as her familiar, yet animals in this life constituted no aggression or danger to humans, as Lissie explains: “[t]his perhaps sounds strange to you, Suwelo. About the lions, I mean. But it is true. This was long ago, before the animals had any reason to fear us and none whatever to try to eat us” (Walker, 1990, p. 393).

Clearly, then, there is a sense of togetherness of humans and animals that seems impossible today, when most people think, Lissie claims, that a lion is “some thing that cares about tasting their foul flesh if they get out of the car in Africa” (Walker, 1990, p. 394). Eventually, however, this togetherness comes to an end when Lissie - a boy in this past life - is expected to find a mate. The girl he meets has her own familiar, a serpent named Ba. Immediately after their sexual coupling, the boy comes to recognize his racial difference, the whiteness (apparently the result of what we would now term a genetic mutation) that his mother had always hidden from him by the application of pigmented ointment (Walker, 1990, p. 398). Empathizing with her partner’s thorough trauma by this recognition of racial lack, the boy’s mate seeks to comfort him, displaying once again the human-animal relatedness that obtained in this past life:
She was crying as much as I was, and beating her breasts. For we had learned mourning from the giant apes, who taught us to feel grief anywhere around us, and to reflect it back to the sufferer, and to act it out. But now this behavior made me sick. I picked up a stick and chased her away. (Walker, 1990, p. 398)

As his mate’s familiar defends her, the boy kills Ba in a final act of violence caused by the repression of his grief. “In my rage I struck it, a brutal blow, with my club, so hard a blow that I broke its neck, and it fell without a sound to the ground.” Finally, the boy’s mate retrieves Ba’s broken body and abandons him (Walker, 1990, p. 399).

This memory, as recounted by Lissie, can be seen as a feminist anti-racist re-enacting of the story of the Fall. Through a feminist reading, Eve’s temptation of Adam under the evil influence of the serpent becomes the story of humanity’s (primarily Man’s) loss of sexual innocence, of the moment that the difference between the sexes is first perceived and patriarchy instituted. In Lissie’s story, this becomes the boy’s unwarranted aggression toward the girl, born out of the repressed pain of his racial difference or imperfection. Oppression by gender and race, Walker suggests, marks this most powerful biblical myth of human origins.

Linking this assertion to the question of animals, Walker has realigned the strict opposition of human and animal that marks the story of the Fall. She positions the animal inside a triangular relationship that is not conditioned by species: woman-familiar-man, in contrast to the positioning of the serpent of Genesis. There, the serpent is necessarily external to a specifically human community - it acts on Adam and Eve as an agent of evil. This is because it is only by being thus separate that the figure of the animal can bear the burden of the traumatic rent in this community that is sexual and racial difference. How then do we read the murder of the familiar-serpent Ba? With it, Walker suggests a continuum between the rhetorical violence in the humanism of Genesis - the exclusion of the animal in order to underwrite the human community - and a more literal violence against animals. Such violence is in turn authorized by the assertion of humans’ essential difference from animals.
Yet, the rehearsal of Lissie’s past life does not end with the boy’s racially based aggression towards his mate and her familiar and the exile from his community that it causes. Rather, Walker goes on to ask her most pertinent questions about the representation of animals. Alone, the boy enjoys an all too brief period of care by his mother’s familiar Husa during which the lion gives him the skin of one of the already lame animals he has killed. As Lissie relates, she (that is the boy) uses it as clothing:

> With a stone I battered it into a shape that I could drape around myself. I found a staff to support me in my walks and represent “my people” [italics added].

Husa left.

And now I gradually made a discouraging discovery. The skin that Husa gave me . . . frightened all the animals with whom I came into contact . . . They ran from me as if from the plague. And I was totally alone for many years. (Walker, 1990, p. 400)

Thus the post-lapsarian boy of Lissie’s past, exiled from his human community by the murder of the serpent Ba, ends up - just as did Adam and Eve - exiled from the animals. Walker explicitly indicates the psycho-social context of this exile: the boy’s desire as a result of his loneliness to assume power over a fictional tribe. He does this by “representing” - that is, symbolizing by means of a staff - “his” people. It is precisely this ability to represent, to make one thing stand for another, that is the very essence of human language, in which a linguistic sign (the word we use) stands for the thing it represents. From this vantage point, we can see Walker’s preliminary suggestion that the very notion of representation - language - marks the moment at which human community with animals has been lost. As my analysis of her rewriting of the Genesis story shows, however, this separation of humans and animals is not fixed or essential, as is presumed by the view that sees language as the specific mark of the human. Instead, it has an underlying cause in the power of white male patriarchy over women and animals, a power figured in the boy’s murder of his mate’s familiar.

The argument that the notion of unbridgeable human-animal difference is socially constructed opens out, as I read it, on to a slightly more complex but nonetheless vital point. It is not just that humans are separated from animals
by the violence inherent in linguistic representation; rather, the very concept of an irreducible difference between humans and animals is always already ideological. I should be clear that Walker does not disavow the obvious facts of physiology and ecology to claim that there are no differences between humans and animals. Rather, my reading suggests that the notion of codifying the relationship into an essential difference in kind - especially in terms of one symptom such as language use - is marked from the beginning by the exercise of human power over animals.

The conventional claim that the difference between humans and animals is constituted by the simple fact of language begs the question of the power relations involved. The inscription of that difference in humans’ dominant form of communication (language) is necessarily an exercise of human ideological power. Walker symbolizes this power in the murder of the serpent Ba. Violence against animals is implicit in the concept of linguistic representation as such while it remains conceived as that which marks their unbridgeable separation from the human community.

Moving on from this argument, Walker’s concern is to dismiss the claim that as linguistic beings humans always are already separate from animals in order to open the possibility of bringing the two close. It is a claim that - as Lippit (2000) shows - has the validation of the western philosophical tradition. It is to counter such a hefty weight of agreement that Walker deconstructs the Ur-text of Judeo-Christian myth, Genesis. It could be argued that this approach results in a monolithic critique tied to the structural level of patriarchy, one that is blind to the complexities of different historical situations. As I will suggest below, however, Walker does indeed attend to such complexities. More importantly, it is only by first engaging her critique at the broadest level that the notion of essential human-animal difference can be dislodged from its cultural centrality. Therefore, we must bear this reason in mind while analyzing Walker’s researches at the margins of western history, beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition that for her has divorced humans and animals under the influence of racist patriarchy.

**Alternative Histories, Unheard Voices: Speaking for Animals**

Shortly before her death, Lissie writes a letter to Suwelo, in which, in contradistinction to the rewriting of Genesis, she describes an alternative, non-
Judeo-Christian history of the relationship between women of color and ani-
mals. It is a story of people whose lives have gone unrecorded in conven-
tional western history. Of central importance here is the figure of the witch,
which Lissie has also been in a previous incarnation. Lissie writes that the
witches of medieval Europe were women (often women of color) who had
an especially close relationship with animals. Following from the argument
of the previous section, women, being human and language-using, might be
thought to be separate from animals. Yet in the history Lissie outlines, although
they cannot communicate fully, women in the Middle Ages were not as
divorced from the community of animals as men:

woman . . . kept alive some feeling for the other animals, though she was
reduced to the caring and feeding of one small house cat . . . . We never for-
got it should be possible to communicate with anything that had big enough
eyes! So there we were, the dark women, muttering familiarly to every
mouse or cow or goat about the place. (Walker, 1990, pp. 225-226)

Lissie suggests that one reason why the notion of the “witch” as we currently
understand it appeared in the medieval period under the influence of the
Spanish Inquisition was to meet the need to subdue this relationship with
animals: “[t]he inquisitors, set in place to control us, declared consort- ing with
animals a crime, punishable by being burned at the stake!” (Walker, 1990,
p. 226). Here, the inquisitors’ law that criminalizes “consorting with animals”
and calls its perpetrators “witches” in effect invents a legal category called
“witch” that can be used to describe such women. By being too close to ani-
mals, some women called into question the inquisitors’ belief that to be human
is to be different from animals. To maintain this belief, the inquisitors used
the law to define such women as inhuman “witches.”

Moreover, as Lissie continues, this legal foreclosure of human-animal com-
munication is reinforced by other cultural methods:

The inquisitors claimed we were fucked and suckled by bulls and goats and
all manner of malformed animal creatures. For good measure, they gave
their devil - the black thing that represented the people they most despised
and wished to be separate from - sharp cloven hoofs and pointed horns, a
tail. They made it seem not only natural, but also righteous to kill . . . any
animal or dark creature that one saw. (Walker, 1990, p. 226)
Lissie suggests that through these derogatory images or representations of women and animals, and ultimately through the force of written law, the cultural constructions of the white male inquisitors leave no space for alternative realities, such as that of women who maintained a close relationship to animals. Furthermore, as long as conventional written history consistently fails to recognize this, theirs is literally a silent story. An epigraph to the letter Lissie is writing makes clear these initial and subsequent erasures: “They burned us so thoroughly we did not even leave smoke” (Walker, 1990, p. 221).

It is with this erasure of history, however, that we reach an important point in Walker’s understanding of the representation of animals. First, in order to make these points about witches and animals, she relies on an understanding that both the law and history are powerful means by which the people who write them silence others. She shares the viewpoint of Fudge (in press) that if “our only access to animals in the past is through documents written by humans, then we are never looking at animals, only ever at the representation of the animals by humans.” Walker develops this into the recognition of the power that such representations (in my first sense) have to hide from view the animals (or witches) they represent. As Fudge notes, the fact that “[r]epresentation is always-already inevitable” means that “the real animal can disappear” from our understanding. In this sense, human representations fail both animals and the “witches” who have a close relationship with them. The preliminary conclusion to be drawn here is that language, now specifically understood as language controlled by the interests of the inquisitors (or representation as “speaking about”) separates humans and animals. With the figure of the witch in the story of Lissie’s past lives, however, Walker offers some recuperation from this state of affairs.

Concluding her letter on the subject of language and the distance it creates between humans and animals, Lissie returns to the witch:

The animals can remember . . . But our language they will never speak; not from lack of intelligence, but from the different construction of their speaking apparatus. In the world of man, someone must speak for them. And that is why, in a nutshell . . . goddesses and witches exist. (Walker, 1990, p. 226)
Having traced the creation of the witch in the suppression of women’s relationships with companion animals by the legal discourse of the Middle Ages, Lissie now claims for the witch a special ability: the representation (in my second sense of “speaking for”) of animals. Just as I have suggested that fantastic literature aims at the political power to speak the unspoken, so Walker’s imaginative creation Lissie reclaims the figure of the witch from its designation of evilness or inhumanity and sees it as a place in which animals can be spoken for. The power of both the witch and the goddess, which Lissie also claims to be (Walker, 1990, p. 409), is that being supernatural they are not quite human and not quite animal. At the borders of humanity, both goddess and witch provide creative and imaginative ways to reappraise our cultural ideas of being human. And if, as Lissie’s description of the Inquisition suggests, such ideas have to an extent been formed by criminalizing close communication with animals as witchcraft, the witch perhaps provides an ideal figure to effect a particularly feminist, anti-racist setting for the political representation of animals.

It is necessary now to pause to look critically at what sort of “speaking for animals” is offered here. Walker’s use of the figure of the witch does do some important work by making clear an alternative perspective through which to view a non-oppressive human relationship with animals. As I have suggested, this alternative provides Walker with a way to query the separation of humans and animals by the chasm of language that is central to the western tradition. It does, however, raise a worrying question. We might wonder, as does Greenwood (2000, p. 166), whether Walker reinscribes the politically reactionary idea that to be female or black is to be bound to the bodily realm and hence to be more like animals in the derogatory sense of inhuman. Scholtmeijer (1996) suggests just such a problematic reading of the novel, stating that through Lissie’s descriptions of an elemental connection between black women and animals, “the inner animal, in Miss Lissie, and in all women, surfaces, to explain and render powerful that correspondence between women and animals” (1996, p. 251). Greenwood, on the other hand, adroitly side-steps the problems of such a claim. She asserts that while Walker does perceive an alignment of black people or women and animals, the text is celebratory of it rather than condemnatory.
My argument distinguishes the competing ideas more discriminately than this. First, I would repeat that for Walker the very notion of an essential human difference from animals is itself a rhetorical trope that is marked by our power over them. Hence, the point is not simply to celebrate or condemn closeness to animals. Rather, it is to examine the ideological conditions by which a genuine closeness - that is, one that is not part of a strategy to demean blacks or women as “animals” - might be made possible. Walker therefore writes the story of Lissie in order to release the hold of the “essential difference” argument and to effect just such a possibility.

Both Greenwood (2000) and Scholtmeijer (1996) miss this important aspect of Lissie’s place in the structure of the novel. They fail to see the radicality of Walker’s text by understanding Lissie as a paragon of virtue, someone who unproblematically voices the text’s message or can be wholly integrated into it. In my reading, however, it is fundamental that Lissie’s story itself always remains open to critique, when read - as it will be below - in conjunction with the worldviews of the novel’s other characters. Lissie’s feminist and afro-centric reclamation of history is part of what I see as Walker’s larger commitment to pluralism based on the imaginative understanding of others, both human and animal.

**Imaginative Understanding: Getting Close to Animals**

Before explaining the details and implications of this commitment, I will begin with an example of the novel’s pluralism, in which no one character has a singular claim to morally authoritative status, although ethical choices are certainly made. It is borne out in the story of Fanny, her mother Olivia, her grandmother Mama Celie and her lesbian partner Mama Shug. These latter women are to an extent moral exemplars in the novel, Mama Shug instituting a religion founded on, among other things, compassion for animals (Walker, 1990, pp. 317-319). Yet, it eventually becomes clear that Mama Celie, having herself been battered by her ex-husband, had for a long time repeated the pattern of this abuse by beating the family dog. Her compassion for animals only comes about when Mama Shug, having “liberated” the dog from his subservient acceptance of this and made him bite back, laughs at Mama Celie’s reversal of fortunes, embarrassing her (Walker, 1990, p. 344). Celie’s compassion, then, is not a “truth” inherent in her womanhood, Scholtmeijer
(1996) would appear to argue. Rather, it is the consequence of a specific action arrived at by way of Mama Shug’s complex and empathetic negotiation of emotional factors in Celie’s personal history.

The novel more importantly reveals that although Mama Shug and Mama Celie may appear exemplary in their actions toward others, their very over-competence as parents to both Olivia and her daughter Fanny creates a problem. Olivia comes to feel supplanted as a mother and eventually leaves the home, the gap left by her departure creating a deep sense of loss in Fanny. Fanny’s need to recover from this forms a large part of the novel. Thus, while Mama Celie and Mama Shug echo Lissie’s “speaking for animals”, they also exhibit the capacity of even the most virtuous personal philosophies to overpower and silence other people.

Compassion, Walker seems to say, is the hard-won result of an always ongoing, genuinely engaged thought, rather than easy moral judgments: “the awareness of having faults . . . opens us to courage and compassion,” she has written (Walker, 1997, p. xxiii). This acceptance of flaw leads directly to Walker’s celebration of the creativity of imagination, which always, she believes, maintains an openness to others’ realities, be they human or animal.

I have argued that in the character of Lissie, Walker uses the creative power of the human imagination, especially as it occurs in story-telling, to re-envision the human-animal relationship. The existential distance that the fact of language is conventionally said to insinuate between humans and animals was shown to be socially constructed and power-laden and can thus be transduced. And, as Lissie shows, the force that brings humans close to animals is the creative imagination. Here, Walker foreshadows a point made by Coetzee (1999). His character, a novelist, discusses the supposed boundary between humans and animals suggesting that the imagination can bring the two close:

There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. If you want proof, consider the following. Some years ago I wrote a book called The House on Eccles Street. To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom . . . The point is Marion Bloom never existed. Marion Bloom was a figment of James Joyce’s imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into
the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (p. 35)

Walker (1988) has taken this point further, arguing that the very purpose of fictional writing is to use the imagination in this way and that the absence of life is not even a barrier to it:

[The] writer’s pen is a microphone held up to the mouths of ancestors and even stones of long ago. [Once] given permission by the writer . . . horses, dogs, rivers, and, yes, chickens can step forward and expound on their lives. The magic of this is not so much in the power of the microphone as in the ability of the nonhuman object or animal to be and the human animal to perceive its being. (p. 170)

In these examples, Walker (1988) and Coetzee (1999) equate the imaginative writer to the witch or goddess as exemplified by Lissie: He or she can get close to animals. I would argue, however, that the important aspect here is imagination and the ability to be creative in understanding others, rather than writing per se. Indeed, perhaps surprisingly in a written work, Walker’s novel explicitly denigrates writing, as we saw in Lissie’s narrative when the force of written law was used to criminalize witches and silence those women’s correspondence with animals. So the written word holds the power of representation (in my first sense) to silence others. Therefore, Walker’s speaking for animals through the celebration of imaginative understanding (representation in my second sense) emerges in this novel paradoxically in proportion to the denigration of writing.

This occurs first through Lissie’s past lives, which are always imaginative, though not “imaginary” as she claims that she remembers them (Walker, 1990, p. 80). Despite this claim, however, these past lives never attempt to achieve the status of objective, verifiable fact. It is important to remember that Lissie’s past lives are explicitly contrasted to official history, always appearing in the form of the narratives that she tells to Suwelo, himself (significantly) a professor of American history. These force him to recognize, for instance, that the authoritative discourse of history, and hence the written facts on which his knowledge is based, often ignores the stories of women, Native Americans, other people of color and animals - groups of individuals who do not fit the authoritative description of the past.
This distrust of the written word is dramatized explicitly in the text, in which written documents of the past have a very tenuous status. For example, one character reads the diary of her nineteenth-century ancestor, Eleandra Burnham and in it learns about the history of British Imperialism. Even before the diary has been completely read, it crumbles in its reader’s hands having been eaten by moths (Walker, 1990, pp. 258-259). In it, Eleandra tells of a trip to the British Museum in which a captured indigenous African is housed as an exhibit. This exercise of colonial power reminds Eleandra of animals: “[a]nimals in zoos were afraid of me simply as [yet] another human being come to stare at them, but this was different somehow” (Walker, 1990, p. 250).

This issue marks one aspect of the novel in which Walker moves beyond the rather unhistoricized approach to the question of human-animal difference analyzed in this essay. She extends the understanding of the important place of animals and zoos in nineteenth-century British colonialism - extensively documented by Ritvo (1987) - to the perspective of contemporary global capitalism. As the novel opens, Zedé, a Guatemalan woman, crafts head-dresses from peacock feathers. Hers, the most beautiful, are made from found feathers retrieved by Zedé’s daughter, not those plucked from the live peacocks whose “mournful cry” is distressing to her (Walker, 1990, p. 11). When, years later and living in 1970s San Francisco, the daughter herself makes head-dresses for rich American rock stars, her own child is also able to “find” feathers by stealing them from the sweatshop where she works as a cleaner. By paralleling the two generations, Walker implies that the plight of peacocks and of sweatshop workers, of animals and oppressed peoples, must be understood in the context of each other. As an aside, I would note that such an approach indicates the lack of perceptiveness in Scholtmeijer’s claim (1996, pp. 249-250) that the novel has a “vegetarian message.” Such an appeal to moral authority cannot accommodate the fact that eating meat is a vital part of Lissie’s identity as an African-American and that self-adornment with feathers plays a crucial role in maintaining the cultural identity of displaced South American peoples in the novel (Walker, 1990, pp. 263 ff., 227).

The disintegration of Eleandra Burnham’s diary is mirrored elsewhere. Fittingly enough, the letter in which Lissie narrates her alternative history of witches is written in special invisible ink, which disappears after being read only once (Walker, 1990, p. 225). Clearly, in both of these instances the all-powerful sta-

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tus of documentary history is being problematized. Furthermore, she recalls a confrontation with a white woman professor after a lecture at which Lissie had been describing a past life as a slave of the middle passage. Although Lissie knew that “the professional way to present [her] experience was as if it had been merely told to [her],” she accidentally presents it in terms of actual memories. Recalling the professor’s correcting of her, Lissie tells Suwelo that:

[some] people don’t understand that it is . . . the nature of the mind to recall everything that was ever known. Or that was the nature, I should say, until man started to put things down on paper. The professor went on to say that she couldn’t even imagine what it must have been like on the slave ship.
(Walker, 1990, p. 80)

For Lissie, written history itself, the period when “man started to put things down on paper”, hinders the imaginative understanding of others. In this instance, Lissie is discussing diasporic Africans, yet the point equally applies to the animals of her “dream memories.” Indeed, this white professor’s inability to imagine the conditions of the middle passage can be equated to a failure of imagination.

It might be argued that in thus dramatizing the power of unverified oral history Walker relies on a position of extreme relativism. In this position, as there is not one historical “truth” and all interpretations of reality are equally truthful or valid, genuine inquiry is impossible. This reading, however, would miss Walker’s point. First, she does not deny that there are empirical facts. Rather, she draws attention to the way in which a selection of (in themselves perfectly valid) historical facts can cohere via a particular unified perspective into what might be called a regime of truth. As such, this partial and selective approach, which characterizes any history, nonetheless uses for its own ends the power inherent in the absolute authority of the truth. In terms of animals, we might say that the truth at which we arrive by viewing humans and animals in terms of language use is that they are essentially different. The consequent problem is that the fact of such a difference (invisible if we look at the issue from a different perspective) is itself backed up by the powerful status of truth.

Walker’s response is to abjure the absolute authority inherent in that power. Relativism, on the contrary, smuggles this power of authority in through the
back door by simply sharing it across the variety of different interpretations of empirical reality. I would argue that it is precisely through Walker’s approach of holding back from the authoritative power of truth that genuine inquiry becomes possible. A good example of this is Walker’s strategic marshalling of Lissie’s claim that the witches of Europe were often women of colour. Walker no doubt gleaned this from the many afro-centric alternative histories that proliferated in the early eighties, though it is a position with which many would take issue. What is important, I think, is that Lissie’s claim retains the value of highlighting the racist and sexist arena in which the argument of human-animal difference appeared and is maintained. Yet, it is equally important that its mode of presentation also ensures that Lissie’s claim remains open to doubt on a factual level by her interlocutor, the novel’s historian Suwelo (Walker, 1990, p. 222), as well as by its readers.

Just as I have indicated Walker’s concern with the written word and the representations it offers, so too photographic images are problematized. Living in the house of his recently deceased uncle before his first meeting with Lissie, Suwelo notices that there are many faded patches on the wall where once there were photographs. Eventually he discovers that these correspond to photographs of Lissie that she had hidden. However, when she gives him them, what he sees are “thirteen pictures of thirteen entirely different women” (Walker, 1990, p. 107), as it transpires that this photography has magically been able visually to capture Lissie’s various past lives. I will conclude with this example that is vital to Walker’s understanding of representation, in my first sense of using words or images to stand for the phenomena they represent. First, the fact that Lissie’s past lives shine through in these magical and unusual pictures calls attention by contrast to the way that photographs, being mere static images, reduce and simplify the complexity of life. Beyond any photograph, these pictures suggest, there is always a varied life history that cannot be captured. Just as Walker suggests that written history excludes the lives of people (or animals) not considered important, even photographs - what we might think of as the most “realistic” of representations - by their very nature exclude much.

Furthermore, Lissie’s hiding of the photographs from Suwelo until she knows he will be accepting of her unconventional life story marks a series of connections that it has been the purpose of this paper to outline. It links Walker’s
disaffection with claims to absolute truth in written or photographic representation, her valorization of imagination and creativity rather than “facts,” and her concern to speak for animals. Lissie later tells Suwelo that, just as she had hidden the photographs, she has always had to hide her past lives. Particularly harrowing for her is the fact that even though her empathetic husband knew about many of her past lives, she had repressed the memory of her being a white boy cared for by a lion because of her husband’s intense fear of white people and cats. She can only divulge it when she meets Suwelo, by whom she thinks this life stands a chance, not of being believed, but “of simply being imagined, fantasised” (Walker, 1990, p. 402).

Importantly, Suwelo’s imaginative ability to understand others is always only partial in the novel, part of an ongoing learning process that the novel describes. He is not complacently offered as an exemplar of the imaginative understanding the novel promotes. Rather, we view Suwelo moving from a position of self-centered authority at the novel’s opening to one of humble, outward-looking ignorance at its end. Such a commitment to ignorance promotes the ongoing learning about others and their worldviews that Walker sees as the precondition of closeness to animals. Until Suwelo paradoxically learns this ignorance, and with it openness to others, the closeness to animals that is figured in Lissie’s past lives remains hidden, silent, impossible. Therefore, it is not only the failure of photographic or written representations that stops the closeness to animals described in Lissie’s memories being heard. Human separateness from animals is equally reinforced by the added failure of people to imagine the possibility of such a closeness. This is Walker’s abiding concern in *The Temple of My Familiar*. The creative power of the human imagination - exemplified most obviously by Lissie’s oral history - enables humans to bridge the gap caused by the insistence that language use separates them from animals. It is only by abjuring authoritative claims to the truth, by being open to the realities of others, and by “imagining” or “fantasizing” the very possibility that people can get close to animals.

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Notes

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This essay has benefited from the suggestions of Steve Baker, Jonathan Burt, and an anonymous reviewer for Society and Animals.

Lippit, however, does not address the implications for animals of the challenge to this secure human ownership of language in the post-humanist philosophy of language of Wittgenstein and Derrida. Cary Wolfe (in press) gives an exemplary account of this alternate line of thought that runs parallel to much of the argument of this essay.

Derrida (1997, pp. 265 ff.) offers a different reading of Genesis from the point of view of the animal that is consonant with Walker’s. He goes as far as to claim not only that humans can be close to animals but that their very being is constituted by that relationship of contiguity: “I am inasmuch as I am alongside [aupres] the animal” (p. 261). The translations from Derrida (1997) come from an unpublished manuscript by David Wills.

Coetzee’s character’s argument here fascinatingly transcends the ethical dilemma of linguistic representation and the real animal. She posits that from the point of view of the creative understanding delineated here the “realness” of its object is of no importance to the ethical or “sympathetic” imagination; indeed, real animal and fictional creation are equivalent.

Braendlin (1996) explains that this very openness is reinforced by the form of the novel itself.

References


