Gone to the Dogs: Inter-Species Bonds and the Building of Bio-Cultural Capital in America, 1835--Present

Merit Elfi Anglin, College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Date Awarded
2012

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Department
American Studies

Advisor
Chandos M. Brown

Abstract
In following the rise of canis lupus familiaris from America's pet dog to dogmestic partner and ontological metaphor for capital unseen and humanly unseeable this dissertation hopes to reveal the 'spirit of calculation' that undergirds the nation's seemingly disinterested love for their four-legged others and demonstrate how cultural politics affect and are in turn affected by bio-politics and bio-power. It argues that in response to the deflation of prevalent signifiers of social standing and sexual or matrimonial desirability during the financial and ontological crises of the 1830s, Jacksonians turned to the dog as an incorruptible sign of invisible individual substance. In their seemingly disinterested dedication to another, dependent species, they displayed advanced levels of self-denial, the defeat of the animal within, and sophisticated social skills suggestive of higher (rational) humanity, biological wealth, and natural status. Companion dogs thus became a commodity of distinction that exploited preexisting cultural bias toward less material concepts such as "gentility" and "grace." Canine companions helped salvage their caregiver's social position and desirability, better their chances in courtship, and secure the transmission of accumulated biological and cultural assets to the next generation. In transforming into timelessly dependable institutions for safeguarding and increasing embodied human capital, pet dogs became living and breathing "pet banks," whose perpetuity proved antithetical to President Jackson's ephemeral "pet bank" scheme. Canine pet-bank power in capital management, courtship, and propagation not only raised dogs' desirability but also the stakes and quality of inter-species performances and, most importantly, the specter of "interest." As canine companions grew more and more numerous, more and more intimate, and more and more impertinent, they became dogmestic partners whose economic utility in the building, maintenance, and reproduction of cultural and biological capital was increasingly difficult to deny. In close readings of the works of nine American writers this dissertation traces literary strategies of denial that maximize the accumulation and transmission of capital through "artlessly" altruistic, inter-species companionship, on the one hand, and openly selfish intra-species relations on the other, by separating dogmestic and domestic partners, the source and vehicle for power, through time, space, and, most recently, reconceptualized human reproductive units. It is within these key moments, when inter-species intimacy stops to assist and begins to impede human survival, that humanity signifies animality, that the human can be decentered and the human-animal divide overcome. In delineating heretofore hidden cultural connections, I hope to show that while the dogmestic has helped re-etch national, religious, racial, classist, gender and ethnic lines, and assisted in the bio-cultural dispossession of intra-species "Others," dogmestic practices have just as consistently and profitably been performed by members of miscellaneous outgroups to overcome putative biogenetic differences and challenge the status quo. My analysis suggests that pet dogs
Fluctuating bond prices presented a unique challenge. Certainly, the capitalist class could afford to take such risk, but those of ordinary means didn't like watching the value of their bonds change. Executives from America's largest corporations worked hard to have employees enroll in the savings bonds payroll program, which would allow them to save a set percentage of their paycheck and have the money invested automatically in the new Series E savings bonds. According to the US Treasury, the new Series E savings bonds were originally known as the "Defense Bond" in 1941, the "War Bond" from 1942 to 1945, and later, just a regular savings bond. Cultural capital also exists in an objectified state. This refers to the material objects individuals own that might relate to their educational pursuits (books and computers), jobs (tools and equipment), clothing and accessories, the durable goods in their homes (furniture, appliances, decorative items), and even the food they purchase and prepare. These objectified forms of cultural capital tend to signal one's economic class. Cultural Capital in an Institutionalized State. Jeffrey Coolidge / Getty Images. Everyone has cultural capital and deploys it on a daily basis to navigate society. All forms of it are valid, but the hard truth is that they are not valued equally by society's institutions. This begets real economic and political consequences that deepen social divides.