



Kissing Cousins: A New Kinship Bestiary

Frances Bartkowski

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Since DNA has replaced blood as the medium through which we establish kinship, how do we determine with whom we are kin? Who counts among those we care for? The distinction between these categories is constantly in flux. How do we come to decide those we may kiss and those we may kill?

Focusing on narratives of kinship as they are defined in contemporary film, literature, and news media, Frances Bartkowski discusses the impact of "stories of origin" on our regard for nonhuman species. She locates the role of "totems and taboos" in forming and re-forming kinship categories-groupings that enable us to tie the personal to the social-and explores the bestiary, among the oldest of literary forms. The bestiary is the realm in which we allegorize the place of humans and other species, a menagerie encompassing animals we know as well as human-animal chimeras and other beings that challenge the "natural" order of the world. Yet advances in reproductive technologies, the mapping of genomes, and the study of primates continually destabilize these categories and recast the dynamic between the natural and the cultural.

Bartkowski highlights the arbitrariness of traditional kinship arrangements and asks us to rethink our notions of empathy and ethics. She shows how current dialogues concerning ethics and desire determine contemporary attitudes toward issues of care, and suggests a new framework for negotiating connection and conflict.

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