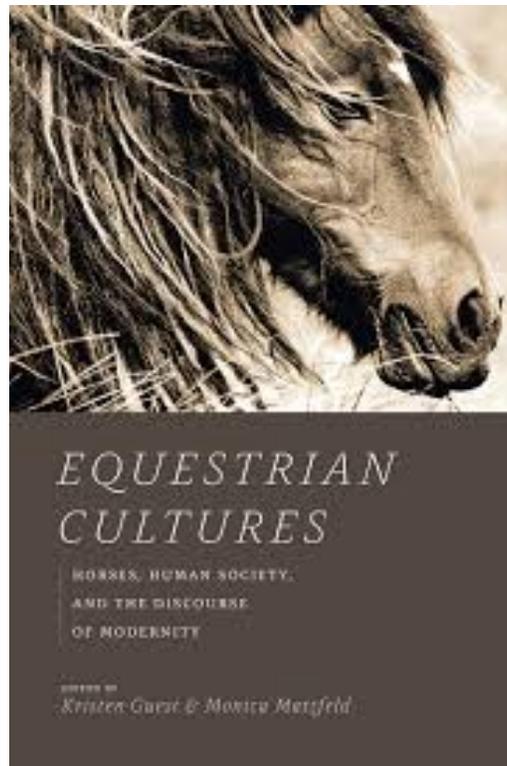


Reviews

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Can the Horse be Modern?

Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfeld, eds. *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 276 pp. \$90.00 (hb), \$30.00 (pb).



A new collection of essays edited by Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfeld, *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity*, responds to an increasingly robust literature on the horse in the fields of animal studies, literature, and history. The introduction challenges the speciesism implicit in the predominant periodization of modernity, which repeats “a narrative of dislocation and alienation” with respect to the natural and animal worlds at large, and the horse in particular. Titles like *Farewell to the Horse* (Ulrich Raulff, 2018) suggest the march towards the modern is proportionate to the declining relevance of horses, and while minding the past importance of equids, also serves as an honorable salute to their obsolescence. Guest

and Mattfeld, however, propose that the horse — and not merely its symbolism — is in fact central to understanding conflicts that pervade the experience of modernity. They argue broadly that modernity reveals its unanticipated and contradictory effects in human-animal relations, and for that reason has “amplified [the horse’s] symbolic centrality to human culture” as “vehicles thorough which [humans] have attempted to make sense of modernity’s effects” (3-4).

The twelve essays in this collection cover expected topics, from war to horse breeding and horseracing, as well as the less expected ones of amateur circuses and horsemeat banquets, in a primarily Anglophone context (England, United States, Australia, as well as Germany and France). Each article illuminates a distinct facet of modernity embodied by horses, but there are also important connections apparent across the collection. Beyond the arbitrary starting date of 1700, the editors define three primary forces of modernization addressed in corresponding sections in the volume: Technology, Commodification, and Nationalism. Within these sections, several predominant “contradictions” of modernity become evident, such as that, for example, between emerging technologies and theories of sentimentality; between the forces of commodification and attempts to transcend transactional valuation; and between the insecurities of national identity and the certitude of rational economic development.

Regarding the experience of technology in modernity, three articles illuminate not only the horse as technology but also the agency of the horse’s material connection to human lives. Monica Mattfeld, in “Machines of Feeling: Bits and Interspecies Communication in the Eighteenth Century,” masterfully examines the riding apparatus of the bit. Reviewing traditions of horsemanship as well as the history of science, Mattfeld argues that eighteenth century scientific theories about the role of nerves, sensation, and feeling surprisingly found expression in the use of the hard metallic bit, particularly the snaffle. In the work of riding master Richard Berenger, the bit (in the right hands) exhibited a crucial vital materialism, encoding the “reciprocal embodiment of sensibility” (15) idealized by the image of the centaur, producing the “technoscience” of riding. Donna Landry, in “Horses at Waterloo, 1815,” considers the horse as machine of war in the Napoleonic age, “manufactured” with imported Eastern horses in order to achieve a responsive tool for the cavalryman. The functional aim of producing a close connection between the man and horse on the battlefield through this piece of military technology, however, also found a voice in soldier’s memoirs illustrating the emotional attachment and trust placed in these same animals. Such accounts showcase the soldier’s own sensibility and the internal conflicts of experiencing how the technology of war had wreaked “equine carnage so extreme that ethical questions began to be

asked" (26). Both Mattfeld and Landry define centaur-like relationships that emphasized technology and feeling in equal parts, and consequently point to the conflicted "cyborg" nature of modernity for individuals attuned to the living nature of matter. Sinan Akili pursues this theme *contraposto* through the matter of dead horses. "The Agency and the *Matter* of the Dead Horse in the Victorian Novel" examines "a period when human dependence on, and exploitation of, the horse was at its historical peak" (40), and Akili argues that in death, in particular, the body represented a point at which human and animal worlds converged, in accordance with emerging theories of evolution. Akili illustrates this effective interconnectedness through the significant impact of the dead horse character in the novels' action, even if such relatedness was not explicitly recognized when the animal was alive. Indeed, it was at the point of becoming matter that the horse revealed its entanglement with so many aspects of human experience. Finally, in an exceptional and meditative essay, "The Aura of Dignity: On Connection and Trust in the Photographs of Charlotte Dumas," Rune Gade explores interconnectedness between human and horse around the fringes of the technology of horsepower. Describing the photography of Dumas (*Anima, The Widest Prairies*), Gade characterizes these photos as witness to human-equine interactions outside of work. A quiet moment in the stall of a working draught horse, for example, both makes a statement about the effects of domestication that produced this particular environment of repose, while also confirming the communicative sentience of the individual animal at rest. Photos of feral horses likewise exhibit this communicative state at liberty, despite the broader reality of their history as domesticates. The gaze of these animals, Gade argues, has the power to provoke disquiet in the viewer. The juxtaposition of the quiet inner lives of animals with the external conditions of living in and with humans presupposes a latent acknowledgement of interspecies and technoscientific interdependence.

If the contradictions of modern technology embodied by the horse in the first section emphasize the vital agency of matter — as Akilli might argue, matter matters — the effect of the shame-inducing gaze (in reference to Jacques Derrida's "Animal that Therefore I Am") becomes central to the contradictions of the modern experience of commodification and consumption in the second section. Just as the photos of Dumas disrupt the definition of horse-as-technology, the following essays disrupt the notion of horse-as-commodity. In Charlotte Carrington-Farmer's essay "Trading Horses in the Eighteenth Century: Rhode Island and the Atlantic World," the history of the first "American" breed of horse, the Naragansett Pacer, asks: what is the value of a horse? New England colonists found a ready market for exporting their breed of riding horse

in the Caribbean sugar plantations as early as the seventeenth century, participating in the ready wealth and exploitative industry of sugar-farming by providing the horsepower for the plantation mills. These horses were in high demand on the market in part because they were also worn down by round-the-clock working conditions in the early industrial agriculture. Jessica Dallow pursues the intersection of the horse trade and the slave trade through unfree labor and commodification in “Narratives of Race and Racehorses in the Art of Edward Troye.” The equine portraits of Edward Troye, the “American Stubbs,” documented winning racehorses owned by southern plantation owners in the United States. Similar to Gade, Dallow argues that the portraiture emphasized triangulated gazes and interactions communicating the sense of an inner life for both horse and enslaved horsetrainer, jockey, or groom. Rhetoric found in pro- and anti-slavery tracts at the time emphasized the similarities between slaves and animals, despite protesting human voices of slaves and black authors. Troye’s portraits, therefore, according to Dallow, capture how the fates of both man and horse were tied to each other, and the suffering imposed by their particular market value. Kristen Guest’s essay “More than a Horse: The Cultural Work of Racehorse Biography” reflects on the commodification of the horse and the problems this poses for human understanding of the individual in a capitalist market system. In the genre of the racehorse biography, the hero, a horse immortalized for its ability to win purse money, is simultaneously held up as an example of an animal that cannot be assigned a concrete value because of its individual traits of heart, will, and determination. Guest argues that this genre itself is an expression of a particularly modern anxiety about whether or not an individual, like an Eclipse or Secretariat, can in fact transcend the economic demands of the system that produced it and conditioned its existence.

Underlying the modern trends of technology and commodification covered thus far, we find the dual role of the horse as a communicative partner and material tool, a duality that mimics the anxiety of humans subject to the same forces of modernization. While the first two sections engage deeply with the material reality and subjectivity of the horse as subject of modernization, the third section emphasizes how the horse, as a companion in the modern era, renders these tensions visible in a human-oriented framework of identity. Beginning with the eighteenth century, Magdalena Bayreuther and Christine Rüppell’s chapter highlights the palace stable as an incredible baroque architectural feat, not only symbolically but also politically central to elite expressions of power, attended to lavishly and ritualistically. Pursuing the “unexpected” side of modernization, Kari Weil’s essay, “Circus Studs and Equestrian Sports in Turn-of-the-Century France,” traces the reconfiguration of aristocratic identity in nineteenth-century Paris through an amateur equestrian circus. If horsemanship once indicated the ideals

of a sensitive and fashionable elite in the eighteenth century, by the nineteenth century horsemanship had become an arena of elite conflict between aspiring bourgeoisie and aristocratic privilege. Seizing on a new form of physical culture to separate those of noble birth from bourgeois wealth, the aristocratic amateur acrobat exposed his body in a performance that scandalized bourgeois propriety and reveled in an exclusive mark of physical freedom and virility. This surprising equestrian moment, Weil argues, marks a transformation away from riding as the sumptuous form of elite masculinity, to instead prefer “a disembodied gaze upon others,” including purebred horses and women riders, as an expression of power (183). Susanna Forrest’s delightful chapter “Horsemeat Is Certainly Delicious: Anxiety, Xenophobia, and Rationalism at a Nineteenth-Century American Hippophagic Banquet” likewise notes an unusual engagement with the horse at the turn of the 20th century. Horsemeat, historically the preserve of Eurasian steppe cultures, had been culturally taboo for centuries, but found a moment of cultural acceptance in the United States for three very modern reasons. Waves of immigration brought horsemeat eating from rural parts of Europe, at first spurring xenophobic responses to the practice, but then finding an advocate in the economic rationalization of food supply economics. As a cheap and nutritious food, it was promoted by numerous public health officials and even celebrated in an all horsemeat banquet by veterinary students. The advent of World War I food rationing brought the movement to the mainstream. If the dead body of the horse had illustrated interconnections between humans and animal bodies in the Victorian age, Forrest illustrates how the dead body of the horse itself served as an agent of modernization.

Nationalism is one of the defining features of modern identity, and its contradictions are revealed in two remaining essays. Tatsuya Mitsuda, in “The Politics of Reproduction: Horse Breeding and State Studs in Prussia, 1750-1900,” allows us to think of the horse as a national flag, “raised” by the Prussian State. Reflecting bureaucratic centralization, the Prussian state stud system identified and tested individual stallions as a seed bank for domestic horses. An ideal body type originally set by imported Arab and Thoroughbred horses for military uses later shifted to meet the demands of industrialized agriculture and produce a heavy draught horse. The nationalist manipulation of horse bodies rested on the need for horsepower in both military and economic arenas, a need that lasted well into the twentieth century. In this contemporary era, however, horses have controversial value as markers of national identity, as potently illustrated by Isa Menzies in “Heritage Icon or Environmental Pest? Brumbies in the Australian Cultural Imaginary.” A debate over Australian feral horses, known as “brumbies,” initiated by an environmental conservation initiative in 2000 to

remove them from national parks, met with a concerted campaign to protect the brumbies as central to Australia's cultural heritage. This situation echos that currently facing federal programs to contain feral horses in the western United States opposed by groups hoping to preserve an historic free-roaming horse and burro tradition through landrace registries. Unlike in the United States, however, the brumbies gained cultural heritage status in Australia in 2015. Menzies provides an astute analysis behind this movement, as both celebration of national identity, but also as a response to assuage the "anxiety of belonging" for settler-colonial heritage. Menzies concludes that the drive to eliminate the feral horses by national agencies imbues the animals with intense, if destructive, agency, while the argument for their protection as cultural heritage positions the animals as constructions symbolizing national belonging, justifying and preserving the consequences of a colonial past for the modern nation. Menzies, together with Gade, offers an important perspective into the still underexplored experience of the feral horse in modern life.

This volume is a welcome addition to the field of equine studies and animal studies, and the scholarship in this volume engages with several defining theorists in the "animal turn." Jacques Derrida's analysis of the gaze of the animal, as one inducing shame and self-knowledge, serves as a touchstone for the experience of modernity and appears in several places in this volume. In extending the analysis of the horse as an agent of modernity, the work of Donna Haraway on the "kinship of technoscience," Karen Barad on agential realism and "ethico-onto-epistem-ological intra-action," and Jane Bennet on the vitality of matter all provide theoretical foundations for focusing on the horse within an otherwise rationalized, technological, anthropocentric vision of the modern.

Most valuable, however, is that none of these essays rely entirely on a reading of theory. Instead, research contributions from each individual essay are hard won from attentive and thoughtful readings of sources. The analyses explore non-human and human animal relations as a subaltern methodology, suggest pathways to recognizing the agency of animals and materiality, and complicate divisions of nature and culture. These inquiries meet the horse where it is found, at crucial moments of conflict, introspection, or manifestation of tensions in the experience of modernity. In a cumulative sense, these essays show that the history of man and horse never was just a simple story of man's dominance, nor conversely of rationalization and disenchantment over time. Rather, the horse is modern because of its ability to embody the contradictions, fears, and anxieties about commodification, loss of identity, and obsolescence in the face of technology, capitalism, and globalization.