

# “But Where’s the Bloody Horse?”: Textuality and Corporeality in the “Animal Turn”<sup>1</sup>

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## **Summary**

In the last decade, “animal studies” has arisen in belated parallel to other counter-hegemonic disciplines. In order to discuss this new departure of considering animals in the humanities rather than solely the natural sciences, we use the case study of the horse. We discuss what the “animal turn” might mean in disciplinary terms. We show that there is a significant move towards embracing new subject matter, and concomitant new sources, in history writing in southern Africa. We argue, however, that it is difficult to label it a new “paradigm” as it remains largely in the social (or socio-environmental) history camp. Instead, it encompasses a continuing process of inclusion and measured mainstream acceptance of the animal as subject, object and even perhaps agent. The “animal turn” (and, indeed, “green social science”) is not founded on any one method or approach, instead it remains diverse in terms of its methodology and *raison d’être*, mirroring the multiplicity of its object of study. We discuss changes within socio-environmental history that might permit a transformed understanding of the horse as historical actor with the acceptance of the animal as subject, object and even agent – in short, how academics in the humanities might find the “bloody horse”.

## **Opsomming**

“Dierestudies” het in die afgelope dekade in ’n vertraagde parallel met ander teen-hegemoniese dissiplines ontstaan. Ten einde hierdie nuwe wending te bespreek, naamlik om diere in die menswetenskappe eerder as uitsluitlik in die natuurwetenskappe te bestudeer, gebruik ons die gevallestudie van die perd. Ons bespreek wat die “dierewending” moontlik mag beteken in dissiplinêre terme. Ons dui aan dat daar ’n beduidende beweging na die insluiting van nuwe onderwerpe, en gevolglik nuwe bronne, in geskiedskrywing in suider-Afrika is. Ons betoog egter dat dit moeilik is om hierdie beweging as ’n nuwe “paradigma” te beskryf, aangesien dit grootliks binne die kader van die sosiale (of sosio-omgewings-)geskiedenis bly. Dit behels veel eerder ’n voortdurende proses van insluiting en gematigde hoofstroom-aanvaarding van die dier as subjek, objek en moontlik selfs agent. Die “dierewending” (en, inderdaad, “groen sosiale wetenskap”) is nie gefundeer op enige enkele metode of benadering nie; dit bly divers wat betref metodologie en “*raison d’être*”, en weerspieël hiermee ook die veelheid van studieobjekte in hierdie veld. Ons bespreek veranderinge binne die sosio-omgewingsgeskiedenis wat ’n veranderde begrip van die perd as ’n historiese akteur, met inagneming van die dier

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1. My thanks to Harriet Ritvo, Sarah Duff, and all my postgraduate students working in socio-environmental history.

as subjek, objek en selfs agent, mag moontlik maak – kortliks, hoe akademici in die menswetenskappe die "bloody horse" mag vind.

You praise the firm restraint with which they  
write –  
I'm with you there, of course:  
They use the snaffle and the curb all right,  
But where's the bloody horse?

Roy Campbell (1901-1957)  
"On Some South African Novelists"

Animals are roaming the Groves of Academe. They bark and paw at the threshold of the Ivory Tower. Historians have started to open the doors a trifle. This "animal turn" is part of the so-called "greening of the humanities". In the last decade, "animal studies" have arisen in belated parallel to other counter-hegemonic disciplines like Women's Studies.<sup>2</sup> In order to discuss the new departure of considering animals in the humanities rather than solely the biological and geographical sciences, we use the case study of the horse. We search the academic fields to try to find the "bloody horse" – both the corporeal animal and the fictive beast. Horses are absent from the official historical record in southern Africa, except when one detects their hoofprints in some battle, finds an allusion to the gallant exploits of a particular horse, or the tragic slaughter of horses in war, or reads of them amalgamated in a much-desired commodity dyad: "guns and horses". Sometimes one hears a distant whinny in a discussion of post-South-African-War Reconstruction or in descriptions of everyday cultural life. Yet horses are everywhere in the primary sources. Horses saturated the colonial economies of southern Africa, buttressed the socio-political order and suffused contemporary imaginations. Right up until the 1930s, horses were integral to civic functioning, replaced with mechanisation only after lively debate (see, for example, Cape Archives Bureau (CAB) 3/GR 4/1/1/25.NO. 8/7 (m)). As Crosby noted, human settlers came not to the colonised world as individual immigrants but intent on mainstream history, or in the (aptly labelled) humanities more generally as part of a grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche (1986: 194).

Just as they had done in Europe, Asia and North Africa, these equine

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2. Julie Ann Smith, "Review of Academic Conferences", *Society and Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies* 9(3) (2001). Three key journals publish solely in the field of humanities on animal-related topics: *Anthrozoös*, *Animal Welfare*, and *Society and Animals*, in addition to foundation texts like Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) and James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals: A study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1986]1996).

coloniers not only provided power and transportation to indigenous people and settlers, but also altered their new environments – both biophysical and social – in various ways.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, as some scholars of animals in the social sciences and humanities have contended, it is the very centrality of animals to human lives that has previously rendered them invisible, at least invisible to scholars (Wolck & Emel 1998: xi).

## The Animal Turn?

A generation ago, in an effort to parody the new social history, a historian wrote a satirical essay under the pseudonym Charles Phineas on “Household Pets and Urban Alienation”, in which he declared that the history of pets remained too much the history of their owners, illuminating more about the owning than the owned (Phineas 1973-1974: 338-343). His words now resonate without irony, because – drawing eclectically on the fields of environmental history,<sup>4</sup> literary criticism, psychology, cultural geography, bioethics and anthropology – recent historiography is beginning to give greater emphasis to the importance of animal-centred research. As Harriet Ritvo has observed, no longer is the mention of an animal-related topic likely to provoke “surprise and amusement” as was the case twenty years ago. Instead of being dismissed as simply a fad, the increasing inclusion of animals is gaining momentum – as part of our social and political narratives, from the early movement of hunters and gatherers, to the grand narrative of domestication and agricultural transformation, to figuring allegorically and materially in religions, social rituals and literature (Ritvo 2004: 204). Of course, animals per se can hardly be described as uncommon historical subjects (see Clutton-Brock 1989, Russell 1986). Their remains – both corporeal and pictorial – have long provided sources for societies that left no written evidence.

“Animal studies” is now a growing academic field, with its own journals, and wide-ranging in disciplinary terms: extending from, for example, anthropologies of human-animal interactions, animal geographies, the

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3. For an ovine comparison, or the “ungulate irruption”, see Elinor Melville, *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

4. For some classic texts that set the current parameters of the field, see Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Cronon, William (ed.) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) and Worster, Donald & Crosby, Alfred W. (eds) *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

position of animals in the construction of identity, and animals in popular culture (see e.g. Rothfels 2003, and Philo & Wolch 2000). This departure draws on “the dialogic intersection of nature, culture, and literature” often described as ecocriticism, “green cultural studies”, “environmental literary criticism”, “political ecology”, or “the natural history of reading” (or vice versa). These are not synonymous but are profoundly connected – often overlapping – intellectual projects. Equally, there is a vigorous movement towards a more materialist understanding of animals and their role in human history. Analysis is progressively more multi-sited, including rural and urban locales, literary, cinematic and cyberspace arenas, and touching on themes like the industrialised food chain, ecotourism, socio-political and economic movements, the history of science, and the construction of national identities. Some of the new historical scholarship on animals has been the work of historians (like Ritvo, and Thomas), some the work of literary and cultural studies practitioners (like Fudge, and Baker). Nevertheless, whether the animal “turn” is manifested in ecocriticism, environmental history or featured in the interdisciplinary domain of “animal studies” it remains the case, as Ritvo has observed, that historical research provides much of the bedrock context for more exclusively interpretive scholarship.<sup>5</sup> To understand developments in the field to date, with particular focus on the discipline of history, we need to ask not only “Why animals?” but also “Why now?”<sup>6</sup>

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Some might argue that the decline of Marxism from 1989 prompted a “move from red to green”. Certainly the international “green movement” has effected change within academe with scholars focusing on the history of science, technology, and the environment. Moreover, as Wolch and Emel contend, human practices now threaten animal worlds – indeed, the global environment – to such an extent that humans have now both an “intellectual

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5. Harriet Ritvo’s seminal *The Animal Estate*, for example, uses human-animal relations as an analytical framework to argue that animal-related discourses in Victorian England revealed that not only did animal taxonomies reflect wider societal values, but were visceral locales where social status could be contested and resolved. Correspondingly, Kathleen Kete has shown the way animal representations were used politically and ideologically in modern Europe to mark “in” and “out” groups, for example, by the Nazi animal protection laws of 1933.
  6. Our work in the humanities is, by its very nature, an accretive project. One should, however, perhaps avoid prescriptive research agendas not only for ethical reasons, but because intellectual libertarianism generates some of the best research.

responsibility" and "ethical duty" to consider animals closely.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, additionally, the ethological observations of animals as closer to humans than we acknowledge leads towards a gradual rejection of the nature-culture distinction that has been a central part of C.P. Snow's "Two Cultures", the distinction between social and natural sciences. Other theorists have argued that animals were never part of the modernist project – except, arguably, as commodities – and in the postmodern moment, particularly coupled to the rise of the animal rights movement, there is increasing attention from the postmodernist scholars and activists (although these two groups are often at ideological odds).<sup>8</sup> Internationally, processes are at work that challenge received wisdom – secularisation, urbanisation, diminishing family bonds, the refashioning of societies through globalisation, migrations – all precipitate a reconsideration of existing mental hierarchies and certainties, which facilitates the opening up of subject matters. Moreover, some experience these changes as increasing alienation. Arguably, some people search space for aliens and anthropomorphise earth's animals to find echoes of our own humanity in a time of disaffection and social dislocation. Perhaps, we simply do not want to be alone in the cosmos.

### **Animals as Texts**

Quite aside from human loneliness is the issue of decentring the human subject, which, as Baker has argued, creates the space to place animals within the axis of scholarly scrutiny. Although, he adds, animals themselves cannot be discussed, only their representations (1993: xvi). As Chamberlin notes, "Horse is not a horse. It is the word for horse" (2006: 43). Rothfels observes:

We do not really know what we think we know about them. By this way of thinking, what Jane Goodall, for example, has learned about chimpanzees is mostly just a reflection of broader cultural preoccupations expressed in all kinds of different venues over the last four decades. In a sense, her discoveries are as much about humans as about chimpanzees, and this is a point she might happily accept, though probably for different reasons.

(Rothfels1993: xi)

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7. Wolch & Emel 1998: xi. See also on the state of the field "Ruminations" online: <<http://www.h-net.org/~animal/>>.
  8. See Smith (1996: 35-54), and Wolch & Emel (1998: xii). Equally, many of those on the political left fear that the concern may in fact be premised on a return to premodern "animistic" beliefs.

Histories of animals thus arguably claim a more poststructural, “textual” or “linguistic” approach because such histories are necessarily representational, composed of past documents written by humans about animals, which are then doubly reinterpreted by humans (Fudge 2002: 6). There is a measure of methodological disagreement on the first point. Historians like Ritvo are concerned with the “real animal”, with interpretations produced by those who “deal with real animals” – for example, records of breeding regimes, veterinary medicine, agriculture and natural history. Berger, however, contends that he speaks of nothing more real than human imaginings (Berger 1980: 2), and Baker and others have contended that animals themselves cannot be scrutinised, only their depictions (Baker 1993: xvi). The “curb” and the “snaffle” (as Campbell has it) of critical discourse analysis is much in evidence, but the physical animal is missing.

Certainly, historians benefit from the close-reading technique of literary critics, the emphasis on the genealogy and ambiguity of language. Close-reading reminds historians that elements of the concerns surrounding “wild animals” or “feral” animals or “pets” or “scared animals” or “dangerous animals” are a result of language and rhetoric. There may or may not be such a thing as these categories, but they are certainly constructed with words (see Cronon 1995: 69-90; Schama 1995; Cronon 1992: 1347-1376 for fine examples on other themes). Arguably, any symbolic or representational use of the animal must receive the same critical attention from a historian as the real beast (see e.g. Baker 1993).

Yet, that said, classic social history is nevertheless perfectly able to contain ideology and materiality, textual discourse and corporeality without recourse to postmodernist theory. However, perhaps it was in reaction to the extreme reification (and concomitant rarefaction) of the “textual turn” within the discipline of history that made some (other) historians yearn for the possibilities of solid corporeality offered by the “animal turn”. Nature, and animals in particular, have a tangibility lacking in “literary theory”. And, unlike structuralism’s strict accent on recurring patterns in literary texts, and deconstruction’s close scrutiny of language’s aporias and contradictions, allowing “in” real animals allows a certain methodological release. Animals cannot be just another cultural construction, because they have literal viscosity. They undeniably exist in a way that sits uneasily with postmodern insistence on textual primacy and, as Dr Johnson once did, we can use them to say “I refute it thus”.<sup>9</sup>

Horses could reasonably have received Johnson’s boot (although, unlike the stone, they might have kicked back). Horses are breathing beasts, which exist and live historical lives and impact on their own world and on the

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9. Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) once famously became infuriated at the suggestion that Berkeley’s idealism could not be refuted. In his anger, Johnson kicked a nearby stone and proclaimed of Berkeley’s theory: “I refute *thus*”.

world of humans socio-politically, and economically. Ironically – considering the pseudonymous Phineas's parody of the kind of social history associated with E.P. Thompson, discussed earlier – social history is well able to deal with both approaches. Masters of social history, like Eric Hobsbawm, Keith Thomas, Eugene Genovese, Thompson, and Charles van Onselen, customarily manage both discourse and ideology as just as integral to their study as material conditions, without needing to be "interdisciplinary" or "shifting paradigms". Writing in the early 1990s, both Hobsbawm and Thompson, for example, explicitly singled out the possibility of ecological catastrophe as the gravest threat to society (Hobsbawm 1994: 568-570; Thompson 1993: 14-15). (Certainly, right from the beginning, environmental history has been influenced by a radical approach forged by social history: the idea of exploring history "from below". In 1972, Roderick Nash, an eminent pioneer in the field, commented that "[i]n a real sense environmental history fitted into the framework of New Left history. This would indeed be history "from the bottom up", except that here the exploited element would be the biota and the land themselves (Nash 1972: 363.)

As Jacobs suggests, the socio-environmental approach highlights new aspects of power, its sources and the motives behind its mobilisation. Since, as Jacobs notes, rather wryly, it is odd that as both social and environmental historians claim to write "from below", they have not encountered each other more frequently (Jacobs 2003: 16). For social historians it is the human oppressed, those trampled underfoot like blacks, women, peasants, labourers; for environmental historians it is that which is literally trampled underfoot like the small organisms, the soil, water, and biophysical surroundings. Both approaches seek not only examples of oppression but agency, exercised by the ecological and social communities. Environmental history (which contains the historical side of "animal studies") and the new social history emerged in chorus as definable fields of study. To some extent, both academic projects had stemmed from socio-political movements gathering impetus during the 1960s and 70s: respectively reacting to the concerns of the ecology/animal rights lobby and the civil rights/feminist campaigns. Certainly they share fertile grounds for cross-pollination. The "grassroots movement" could be quite literal: both learnt from the *Annales* School in calling for the grand biogeographical context and both exhibit an *Annaliste* inspired ambition to explore a totalising history. They espouse the creative use of source materials to come to grips with the previously neglected, particularly ordinary people over elites and everyday life, not sensational events. They can both evoke the human face as opposed to the aridities of statecraft and administrative development. Research in both fields reflects a new scholarly egalitarianism. They both oppose particularity over generality, using case studies to examine larger issues from the bottom

up. They both have faith in the political relevance of the work, particularly its subversive potential (Taylor 1996: 6-19).

Similarly, as noted more broadly above, animals draw increasing academic interest because changes in socio-political ideas are usually echoed by the themes explored by historians. Thus, as Ritvo has contended, just as the field of labour history followed the rise of the labour movement and the subdisciplines of women's history and African-American history followed the women's movement and the civil rights movement, in the last twenty-five years, animal-related causes gained increasing support in the West. To follow Ritvo, animals can thus be seen as the latest beneficiaries of a "democratizing tendency" specifically within historical studies.<sup>10</sup> In ethnographies, animals are beginning to be less perceived merely as a vehicle with which to explore a particular human social pattern or process, than was the case in standards of ethnography such as Geertz, Lévi-Strauss and Evans-Pritchard. Certainly, anthropology offers a good model for other disciplines, including history, as it seems to reconcile these two positions with greater equanimity. Nearly a half century ago, Lévi-Strauss urged anthropologists to acknowledge the ways in which animals afford humans an important conceptual resource (animals, he argued, are "good to think with"), while more materialist anthropology considered how animals serve as sources and products of power and inequality (Mullin 1999: 201-204). Recent work has rejected a material/conceptual divide and argued for the importance of exploring the linkages between both semiotic and economic aspects of human-animal relationships (Mullin 2002: 387-393). While animals are still looked at with the goal of a better understanding of humans, there has been journeyed away from narrowly anthropocentric approaches of the past, which depicted animals as passive objects of human agency. Preceding studies allowed little room for the agency of animals (or indeed some groups of humans, like women and the working class, for example). (see Geertz 1973; Ingold 1988: 84-99; Lévi-Strauss 1963). Historical writing has drawn on such anthropological perspectives but, in contrast, tends to focus on the historical, contextual specificity of any particular human-animal relationship and of how categories, including those of "human" and "animal", are neither inevitable or universal but forged in particular contexts by actors with often conflicting interests.

Moving to the southern African arena, one could argue that these wider trends influenced local trends in history writing. Moreover, under apartheid, many of the most able and creative historians – and, indeed, other scholars in the humanities – focused their research on resistance politics, the deconstruction of racial consciousness and class formation. But democracy in 1994 has allowed a growing historiographical diversity and with the death

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10. For further reflections on this topic, see Ritvo, "History and Animal Studies", 2002, pp. 403-406.

of apartheid, the enemy that animated the most vigorous and creative of the historiographical schools, the Radical or Revisionist, is less cohesive and new rallying points are sought, with a concomitant mushrooming of new nodes of interest. Some of these approaches have been socio-environmental, focusing on a specific group of people and their relations with the non-human living world; how communities related to the environment as they interacted with each other, emphasising issues of social power and identity.

Van Sittert has pointed out that environmental historical writing in South Africa is a “broad church whose catechism has thus far defied the best efforts at scholarly synthesis”, and certainly there are several divergent approaches to the subject matter.<sup>11</sup> Historians of southern Africa, like William Beinart, Lance van Sittert, Jane Carruthers, Karen Brown, and Nancy Jacobs have incorporated socio-environmental historiographical analysis into their work to varying degrees.<sup>12</sup> The self-definition of historians as socio-environmental or environmental historians is recent, although, as Van Sittert points out, the trope is an old one (evident in the Liberal, Afrikaner Nationalist and Radical schools) (van Sittert, pers. comm). Van Sittert shows that environmental history has a long legacy in local historiography with its roots in the strong agrarian social history of South Africa. Socio-environmental history within the academy contains some top NRF-rated academics, younger researchers, and postgraduate interest – all positive indicators that interest in this subject matter is not a mere bubble. However, environmental history is more usually focused on the land, than on animals per se. This is probably because of the already extant strong bedrock body of work on agrarian history, as historical writing is often generated dialogically, in conversation with other historians that have gone before. Environmental history has been perceived as a possible means of augmenting the understanding of state praxis and power as environmental management was a major strategic policy for colonial states and their successor national governments.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there have been calls to make environmental history useful for future pressing environmental issues, like pollution, industrialisation and urbanisation, which have little directly to do with animals but need not necessarily exclude them.

Local interest in “animal studies” has drawn impulsion from the environmental history focus: many of the issues at the crossroads of

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11. For the best discussion of developments see W. Beinart, “African History and Environmental History”, *African Affairs* 99 (2000); W. Beinart & J. Macgregor, *Introduction in Social History and African Environments*, Oxford, 2003.

12. C.W. De Kiewiet was an early exception – his classic writings allowed an environmental perspective.

13. For an excellent discussion see William Beinart.

academic studies of the environment and environmental politics have an animal component. Hitherto, the label “environmental” or “socio-environmental” history has been preferred to the “animal turn in history”, which has not (yet) become a phrase in common parlance in South Africa. The term “environmental” carries with it a portmanteau suggestion of social awareness, relevance and utility, and concomitant worthiness of state and institutional funding. In contrast, the adjective “animal” in such a disciplinary concern appears the self-indulgent preserve of the feminine, middle class and white.<sup>14</sup> (As one angrily amused reader to the *Mail & Guardian* put it: “What is it with white people and animals?”). (*Mail & Guardian*, Q and A sent in by Rehana Rossouw, 15-21 August, p. 29).

The “animal turn” in the southern African social sciences, however, and within the historical guild in particular, is still very small. Most recent international scholarship is still almost entirely Eurocentric or neo-Eurocentric about animals in Europe or in its settler societies. Exceptions with regard to the developing world – including Richard Bulliet’s work on the camel in Islamic society, Peter Boomgaard’s study on tigers in the Malay world, Greg Bankoff’s on the horse in south east Asia, Robin Law’s on horses in West Africa and more specific to southern Africa, William Beinart’s on jackals and sheep, Karen Brown’s on insects, Malcolm Draper’s on trout, Lance Van Sittert’s and my study on the dog in South Africa, my work on horses in southern Africa, and Chris Roche’s on springbok migrations – suggest that commercial pastoralism requires an intimate livestock-human nexus that spawned a “hybrid ‘Cape Vernacular’ knowledge, derived from indigenous, European, folk and scientific sources” about animal management (see e.g., Beinart 2003). There has been some scrutiny of ecological implications, particularly in van Sittert and Beinart’s work, and human-nature relations in literary texts as Slovic (1993: 1103) suggested (Woodward, forthcoming [2007]). Hitherto, the majority of southern African studies that could be classified as animal-focused in subject matter offer little interdisciplinarity (although there are exceptions), they are predominantly classifiable as rooted in social history or at least socio-environmental history. The discussion now turns to the international burgeoning of “animal studies” to identify developments and offer tentative thoughts as to what they might yield for our own work in years to come.

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14. “Animal studies” suffers from what Gordon Allport calls “the tenderness taboo”: human behaviours dealing with instinctual emotions such as love (and in this case, the love of animals?), laughter, ecstasy, and sorrow, have been shunned as worthy topics of study. Not without cause; it is complicated for any researcher to gain adequate distance from the subject to ensure the desired scientific objectivity.

## **Everyone Gets a "turn"?: Disciplinary Turf Wars**

What might the "animal turn" mean in disciplinary terms? History has, for example, variously drawn on semiotics, psychoanalysis, and gender studies (Novick 1988: 469-521). Perhaps such "turns" exist because "[l]earning is always a little bit transgressive, and what we learn around the edges of ... established disciplines often sticks more than what we learn when we're in harness" (Garber 2003). Historians have variously celebrated and reviled the "linguistic turn" (which usually involved at least a nod in the direction of poststructuralism), and the "cultural turn" (which was our wistful salute to anthropology) (Eley 1996: 199-244). The animal turn certainly involves both movements and lays claims to interdisciplinarity.

Freud declared that "[t]he psychological consequences of envy for the penis are various and far-reaching" and "quickly extend both to jealousy and to self-doubt and self-contempt". Substitute "discipline" for "penis" (although who amongst us would?) and one gets the predicament of interdisciplinarity neatly encapsulated. Marjorie Garber has made this link, pointing out in intellectual life there is the tendency to "imagine that the truth, or the most revealing methods, or the paradigm with the answer, is just over the road apiece – in your neighbor's yard or department or academic journal rather than your own" (Garber 2001: 67). Disciplinary differentiation is an academic strategy marshalled to shield against such offensive intellectual forays and to promote particular concerns (of subject matter, methodology and so on). Insulation may, however, engender insularity. Ghettos can be dangerous places.

Garber also astutely mobilises Freud's notion of the narcissism of small differences, the sibling rivalry between disciplines or similar schools or intellectual projects, to explain the vehemence of disputes that appear to outsiders as either mystifying or trifling. Disciplines and schools of thought deny what appears to observers to be distinct family resemblance as an attempt to constitute the self. Garber explains that "[e]ach group is saying to itself ... 'I am not like that. If you look closely, you can see'" (Garber 2001: 67). "Animal studies" suffers a mild case of such narcissism of small differences, as discussed below.

The first fissure lies in the division between researchers working from an academic activist position conducted in a spirit of commitment to praxis and the non-partisan camp. This is part of a wider fissure in "green social sciences": there is an ontological schism over the *raison d'être*. The first faction contends that "animal studies" should provide the representative voices for non-human animals in an institutional structure that considers them voiceless. Animals do not speak for themselves and leave no texts. Marx's formula regarding French peasants in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is uncannily applicable to animals that cannot create their own documents, oral or written, or author their own historical accounts: "They cannot

represent themselves, they must be represented” (Marx 1919 in Tucker 1978: 608). Others, however, envision the project as non-partisan and non-activist, as a humanistic or social-science-based inquiry into the meaning of animals without regarding their contemporary predicament, because it was primarily concerned with mapping the varying cross-cultural histories, semantics, and aesthetics of animal images instead. For those whose work on animals is self-consciously progressive and normative, such maps tend to be seen as agonisingly anthropocentric. According to Bergman:

[T]he [second camp] talked exclusively about what representations of animals mean to us. They said virtually nothing about how our representations affect the animals, or the ethical issues involved in representation. The actual animals seemed almost an embarrassment, a disturbance to the symbolic field.  
(Bergman 2001: B15)

Animals may leave no texts, but sometimes they *become* texts themselves. There is a subsidiary divergence of opinions over the extent to which the animals *themselves* can be discussed as opposed to mere discourses surrounding them, as hinted at earlier in the discussion under “animal texts”.

That which Bergman referred to as the too often dismissed “embarrassment” is the animal itself. The horse, for example, has been “invented” in two senses: one, it has been created in the minds of people as a symbolic or representational construction and two, it has been literally morphologically refashioned by anthropogenic intervention – with the two categories frequently impacting on each other – which brings historians to the question of agency.

## **Animal Agency?**

Animals are rich cultural tracers: they are integral to the grand narrative of the historical transformation of human existence through domestication and agriculture (Ritvo 1987). Horses were perhaps the last of the animals that humans domesticated. Our two species have become entangled, from the earliest intimate dance of hunter and hunted, to the range of forms the relationship has assumed in different places and at different times, from food, to slavery, to partnership, to alliance, and to perhaps friendship. The uses of horses have changed from simple food source, the fastest and most reliable form of land transport, to partner in war, draught use, pleasure riding, to providing (physical, mental and moral) therapy. Today its importance in the developing world has scarcely diminished and in the developed world it is of great socioeconomic importance to sport and leisure industries. Human societies have been unutterably altered by their encounter with the horse. The horse has itself changed because of the relationship – changed as a species in shape, size, variety, geographic distribution and

demographics, and changed as individuals by war, by training regimes, and by trade networks. The history of horses in human culture can be traced back as far as 30 000 BCE, when horses were depicted in Paleolithic cave paintings.<sup>15</sup> Domestication was not solely a biological, but a cultural, process, which affected both the human domesticator and the animal domesticated. In order to be domesticated animals had to be incorporated into the social structure of a human community and become objects of ownership, purchase, and barter. This was the basis of the Neolithic revolution when the fundamental change in human societies occurred and groups of hunter-gatherers became farmers and pastoralists. Many archaeologists have hypothesised that there was a progression first from generalised hunting in the Palaeolithic, at the end of the last ice age, to focused hunting and herd following. This period was followed by management of the herds, then to human-managed breeding, and finally to artificial selection for desired characteristics. However, the sequence could not have been smooth for the social repercussions of ownership by a community of hunter-gatherers are a bigger stumbling block to domestication than they may seem.

Generally "domestication" has been seen anthropogenically as a process whereby succeeding generations of submissive tamed animals gradually became absorbed into human societies, were increasingly exploited, and eventually lost all contact with their wild ancestral species.<sup>16</sup> However, an argument for some (albeit perhaps limited) agency was exercised on the part of the animal, that the process may have begun as a symbiosis, in which certain species of animals "chose" to become associated with human societies as a survival strategy at the end of the ice age. Stephen Budiansky's *The Covenant of the Wild* suggests *agency* specifically for dogs in throwing in their lot with humans, and perhaps a similar argument could be made for horses. He has challenged the popular Manichean understanding of domestication as either a heroic act of human "triumph over nature" or a tragic act of human "domination and debasement of nature".<sup>17</sup>

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15. The horses in the paintings resembled wild animals and it is thought that true domestication of horses did not occur for tens of thousands of years to come. It is thought that the horses depicted in the Paleolithic cave paintings were simply hunted for their meat by humans.
  16. Since Darwin wrote his classic *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868) a large bibliography has been published on the relationship between humans and animals that is known as domestication. Examples of major publications are Zeuner, F.E. *A History of Domesticated Animals* (1963); Clutton-Brock, J. (ed.) *The Walking Larder: Patterns of Domestication, Pastoralism, and Predation* (1989) and Budiansky, S. *The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication* (1992).

At the end of the Pleistocene, rapid climatic changes that disrupted habitats and food supplies favoured animals that were the animal equivalent of “weeds” – opportunistic, adaptive generalists. Crudely put, in the ensuing extinction spasm, evolution favoured some animals with juvenile traits that made them appealing to *Homo sapiens*. Budiansky suggests that rapidly changing environments created a natural selective pressure that favoured neoteny (the retention of juvenile traits into adulthood). Humans would have selected animals with paedomorphic or neotenic variations because they were more tractable. Those animals who became adult enough to breed but remained neotenuous enough to cower and play, to beg rather than forage for food, and to tolerate human beings and other strange species, contrived to carve a niche for themselves. Humans helped these forever-young animals succeed by feeding, sheltering, and even breeding them. Thus so-called “artificial” selection by humans was arguably “natural” or at least exhibiting some animal agency. Budiansky thus envisions it instead as a process of *co-evolution* between humans and animals. Horse domestication took a comparatively lengthy period to develop and probably depended upon chance genetic changes that would have predisposed some horses to breed in captivity. Horse domestication could thus, in a sense, have been initiated (at least genotypically, in the manner suggested by Budiansky) by the horses *themselves*.<sup>18</sup> The most credible hypothesis is that both the human and equine parts of the equation would have evolved together. Arguably, the species could have chosen to associate with early agricultural settlements and lured societies into a nomadic lifestyle influenced as much by equine as by human behavioural traits. In other words they, as Marx said of humans, “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances ...” (Marx 1919 in Tucker 1978: 608). Thus, horses were indeed our text. But they helped write their own story.

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17. See, for example, T. Ingold, “From Trust to Domination: An Alternative History of Human-Animal Relations” in A. Manning and J. Serpell (eds) *Animals and Human Societies: Changing Perspectives* (*Animals and Human Societies: Changing Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1994), which describes human-animal relationship as transformed from one of a mutually shared environment to unmitigated human domination.
  18. However, even following Budiansky’s argument, an alliance between two predators would have been more likely than a voluntary alliance between predator and prey. Furthermore, considering the problems encountered even by modern collectors trying to breed Przewalski’s horses, it seems likely that horse-keeping would have had to have been relatively advanced before controlled breeding, and consequently domestication would have been possible. See M.A. Lévine “Botai and the Origins of Horse Domestication”. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 18, 1999: 29-78.

### “Horsetory”?

A domestic animal is a cultural artefact of human society but it also has its own culture, which can develop, say in a cow, either as part of the society of nomadic pastoralists or as a unit in a factory farm. Domestic animals live in many of the same diverse cultures as humans and their learnt behaviour has to be responsive to a great range of different ways of life.<sup>19</sup> Although attitudes to the biological divisions between humans and animals are changing, many people will still deny that there can be culture in animal societies. In the context of domestication, culture can be defined as a way of life imposed over succeeding generations on a social order by its leaders. Where the society includes both humans and animals, then the humans may act as the leaders. A debate is emerging on the issue of animal agency in historical processes. Some scholars advocate for the possibility of an animal-centred history. Cheryll Glotfelty has inquired whether, in addition to the “holy trinity of the social sciences” categories race, class, and gender, *place* should be added as a new critical category. Or, indeed, we could add, *species*.

There have been tentative attempts that acknowledge the corporeality of animals, and argue that they have potentially their own history entangled in that of humans, but their own nevertheless – as individuals, with memories and intentions and desires. Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, offers a good example. In examining the interactions of Indians, colonists and livestock in Colonial North America, Anderson shows that the cattle, who were never wholly under human control, exercised historical agency, producing changes not only in the land but also in the behaviour of local communities. Liberated from the restraint of English animal husbandry, previously domesticated animals practically ran wild in America, and many cattle and pigs became feral, “colonized” Indian territory on their own.

In a different vein, I experiment elsewhere with blurring the genres of *history* and *natural history* with an exploratory “horsetory” of the world suffused in the horses’ physical pleasure, memory, intense fear and cyclical seasonality, their strongest traits as grass-eating prey herbivores, their fatal tendency towards overeating and overheating. It is an interesting exercise to write the “history of civilization” through the eyes of the horse. But it remains a Rorschach test, revealing far more about me and my epoch than about the horses’. Social historians have received analogous critique for “ventriloquising” their subjects, silencing the authentic voice “from below”,

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19. Many ethologists will shy away from describing the learnt behaviour of animals as culture, and they will use phrases such as the apparently safer “traditions of behaviour”, or describe the animals as “adaptive decision makers”.

allowing only the narrative voice of the historian to be heard (Minkley & Rassool 1998: 98).

### **Horses, Power and Identity**

This is, in part, because horses have served as a literal and figurative medium for the transmission of commodities, people, and culture. They were used in the manifestation and promoting of particular kinds of identity, predicated on class, gender, racial identity and citizenship. The horse has been considered the aristocrat of domestic animals, serving as a symbol of nobility, imparting an “anachronistic grandeur” (Hobsbawm & Ranger [1983]1997: 143). They communicate a sense of power to people, elevated the status of their riders, literally and figuratively (Lawrence 1988: 223-231). Possession of a horse has historically conferred status. Xenophon himself commented on the conjunction of martial heroism, horsemanship and social privilege in the fourth century BCE. This historical dynamic was observed by Aristotle, who contended that cavalry states tended to be oligarchies, as horses were necessarily restricted to a wealthy minority (Aristotle 1944: 1321a). Horses certainly transformed warfare, starting about c.4000 BCE, in the steppes north of the Black Sea. Horses allowed people to cover greater distances, attack using the element of surprise, and to flee rapidly, remaining a potent weapon until the twentieth century. The elite’s desire for a range of equines to fulfil different needs led to differentiation in equine types, bred for specific social niches. As the Western/non-Western interface grew, so did curiosity about exotic breeds – like Arabians – in a kind of equine “Orientalism” to use Said’s term. Raber contends that the exotic “orientalized” Other was nationalised: for example, the Arabian, Turk and Barb were modified into the English Thoroughbred. By the late seventeenth century, the English had become passionate about horseracing, a dramatic divergence from continental *haute école* which required an altered equine physiology. The Thoroughbred emerged, adapted both conformationally and in terms of disposition for galloping, and drawing not on the horses of the continental *haute école*, but on the blood of the “Oriental” types. As Raber noted the new horse culture reflected and reinforced an inclusive definition of Englishness (Raber & Tucker 2005). Similarly, in the imperial context, in southern Africa and South East Asia, colonists created new breeds of horses to suit their needs – local horse stock [or if there were no indigenous horses but there were various breeds more readily available to import than those of the metropole] could be cross-bred and deliberately shaped into a new form of horse. These horses could differ markedly from those of the metropole, and after a while could come to be identified with the particular colonial culture, facilitating the differentiation from the metropolitan culture. After independence, horses were often one of

the symbols utilised in the development of national pride and self-definition (Alvarez del Villar 1979). In South Africa, horses offer a particularly potent symbol, linked both with ideas surrounding "white power" and with the ethnic iconography of Afrikaner identity (Swart 2003). Narratives of breed have been constructed, in which conceptions of human difference (class, race, national character) were projected onto the horses, and they were then used as vehicles to promote a sense of self-respect through wealth, class, and ethnicity. Inversely, cultural ideology has been used to market formerly low-priced livestock.

### **Horses for Dis/Courses**

Historians, like artists, often fall in love with their models. And breaking up is hard to do. However, as discussed, there is a significant move towards embracing new subject matter, and concomitant new sources, in history writing in southern Africa. So far, however, it is difficult to label it a new "paradigm" as it remains largely in the social (or socio-environmental) history camp. Certainly we should be cautious in approaching claims of a new paradigm, a new discipline, or a new methodology. As John Kenneth Galbraith noted, however, "When you see reference to a new paradigm ... you should always under all circumstances, take cover" (Galbraith quoted in Laurance & Keegan, 1998).

The ultimate fantasy of an academic, as Garber observes, is to be there at the "moment, the gloriously and unabashedly anachronistic moment, of the making and remaking of the disciplines" (Garber 2001: 95). It is tempting to envision "animal studies" as a new discipline, but I conjecture that in southern Africa it will not become a fully fledged, independent discipline, not a truly interdisciplinary project. Stanley Fish has sketched three scenarios that present themselves when people say they are practising interdisciplinary studies. Firstly, they are usually borrowing data or techniques from other disciplines in order to carry out their own disciplinary duties. Perhaps, we are *all* interdisciplinary in this sense, in the sense meant by Dilthey (Bakker 1999: 43-82). In the second scenario outlined by Fish, people say they are practising interdisciplinary studies when they are actually working at a time within a discipline when it is broadening its own frontiers and methodologies. Thirdly, Fish contends, they are establishing a completely new discipline, "one that takes as its task the analysis of disciplines" (Fish 1989: 15-22). This latter perhaps requires a self-reflexive luxury (and disciplinary space, time and funding) that the lean, tough, hard-working historians of southern Africa are unlikely to afford. Interestingly, it was the fear of just such compartmentalisation and concomitant balkanisation that led Keith Thomas and E.P. Thompson to decline to support the formation of the Social History Society in the 1970s because it was not

another branch of history like “postal history” or “furniture history”, it was “a way of doing any kind of history” (Thomas 1994). Similarly, including other species in understanding the past is another “way of doing history”. Still, it is perhaps naïve to suppose that even a “way of doing” history does not require promoters, arbiters, and infrastructural and theoretical support. Nevertheless, the second scenario sketched by Fish is the more probable for southern Africa historians. It encompasses a continuing process of inclusion, normalisation, and gradual mainstream acceptance of the animal as subject, object and even agent. This process is already at work in the subtle shifting of vision, an ocular expansion that allows the creatures on the edge of vision into the disciplinary line of sight. In social history it happened first with workers, then with women and, now animals – the once invisible horse simply becomes visible.

### **“Uku khahlelwa yi hashi esifubeni”**

A historian is “*Uku khahlelwa yi hashi esifubeni*”, someone who has “been kicked in the chest by a horse” – a person who cannot keep secrets. The archives yield confidential details, and oral history, perhaps in particular, opens up and probes the narratives of memory. Interviewing eyewitnesses to reconstruct the past events versus recording the memory, popular history remembered in anecdote, poem, proverb and song. We have already discussed changes within socio-environmental history that might permit a transformed understanding of the horse as historical actor with the acceptance of the animal as subject, object and even agent. Irrespective of whether one accepts a measure of agency in the horse’s historical role, it is still possible to engage with the horse as *flesh-and-blood* object.<sup>20</sup> The textual understanding generated by analysing the discourse around them (their owners, the archives, magazines, poetry, songs, stories and myths) is coupled with the physicality of fieldwork (of touching horses, of watching them move, watching them being ridden, watching them eat and watching them defecate). Almost two decades ago, the pioneering environmental historian, Donald Worster, called for environmental historians to get mud on their shoes (1985: 289).<sup>21</sup> In my line of work, you step in a lot more than that.

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20. For a sustained effort see Walker’s (2005) analysis of Japanese veneration and then slaughter of wolves, which incorporates a “wolf perspective”.

21. Donald Worster, “Appendix: Doing Environmental History”. In: Donald Worster and Alfred W. Crosby (eds) *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 289.

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