

RUMINATION 2.0

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# The History of Animals in the Present Moment

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**HUMANIMALIA** 13.1 (Fall 2022)

**S**ixteen years ago does not feel like the distant past to someone who studies the early modern period, even though things in 2022 do feel very different for all sorts of reasons to 2006, when I wrote my first “Rumination” for *h-animal*.<sup>1</sup> Those sixteen years have seen some substantial developments in animal history. There, things have expanded beyond what anyone might have imagined. Indeed, in an article from 2016 Joshua Specht proclaimed the “triumph” of animal history, arguing that it is no longer emerging, but “has arrived”.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, new scholarship has challenged earlier debates substantially—to the extent that I would say that during that sixteen-year period, I have had my mind changed.



In the first wave of what we might now include in our history of animal history, a key issue was representation, and how human documents and events constructed animals. Foundational to this first wave, and all that has followed, was Harriet Ritvo’s *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (1987). It was in this study that, for example, dog shows emerged not only as events that had a history that might be mapped alongside agricultural shows, the trade in pets, and so on, but also as possessing meanings that raised questions about Victorian conceptions of nation, racial purity, and class. All of these issues, Ritvo showed, were intimately entangled with the display of dogs and, since her work, non-humans have never been disentangled from such human constructions in animal history.<sup>3</sup>

The question that logically followed from this was: if the materials used by historians to build their narratives of the past were always human-made, how could our work counter anthropocentrism? How could we acknowledge that, from a species perspective, the documents of the past were written by the victors, as Walter Benjamin put it, and still attempt to challenge that victorious perspective?<sup>4</sup> Animal

1 Fudge, “History of Animals.”

2 Specht, “Animal History,” 326.

3 For a recent example, see Pearson, *Dogopolis*.

4 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 248.

history could end up just being a history that unpicked the ways in which human cultures portrayed animals and used those portrayals of animals to think about themselves and their human Others. This issue was the focus of my 2002 essay “A Left-Handed Blow”. In it, I proposed that in that unpicking, it might be that we would come to recognize that not only were the animals we could access in our research constructed by humans, but so were the humans: our “natural” place as superior species was a product of centuries of very human work. Unthought anthropocentrism, I suggested, might be undermined by acknowledging this, and perhaps focusing specifically on this anthropocentrism in our historical work.

Such a perspective challenged the idea that humans were separate from the non-human world — that nature was simply a resource or a backdrop for human life — and that human life was the only possible focus of historical scholarship, and this impacted our understanding of different aspects of the past. Jonathan Burt’s *Animals in Film* (2002), for example, showed the centrality of animals to the development of this new medium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Burt argued that animals were not only objects of the human gaze: in the process of apparent objectification, filmmakers had to construct new technologies to capture the non-human lives. Animals made so-called human culture change.

Under the influence of work such as that by Burt, the focus of my thinking shifted from the issue of representation to considering agency and the question of how we might think about animals as actors in the past.<sup>5</sup> Breaking the link between agency and intention as constructed by a Cartesian notion of (solely human) self-awareness, work in animal studies was showing how agency might be constructed through networks rather than via individual intention. This conceptualization was framed in relation to Actor Network Theory, which I first encountered in Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert’s introduction to *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, and was later construed through the use of the Deleuzian conception of *agencement* in

5 Fudge, “History of Animals”.

Vinciane Despret's work.<sup>6</sup> Animal history was also beginning to recognize that agency could be unintentional. Virginia DeJohn Anderson's *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (2004), for instance, argued that domestic animals breaking down a fence did not know they were going to impact human relations and showed that in their actions they were unwitting agents of change in English colonists' relations with their indigenous neighbours. Finally, work has engaged with the idea that agency could be exercised by a group rather than an individual. In a 2020 article, Rohan Deb Roy has shown how the collective agency of white ants "added to the everyday chaos of the [British colonial] administration" in India as the insects consumed paper and wood, "which were among the most crucial material foundations of the nineteenth-century colonial state."<sup>7</sup>

Acknowledging the impact of animals on human cultures thus offered an opportunity to place those animals at the centre of historical work, and just as historians were showing how live animals might be recognized as agents in shifting relationships, so too was the dead matter they could be transformed into being interpreted in new ways. Thing Theory offered a way to claim agency, not only in the living creatures but also in the animal-made-objects: that is, the animals made into objects, but also the objects made from those animal things.<sup>8</sup> Leather, meat, wool, silk and so on previously had their place in historical studies in relation to analyses of agricultural production, economic development, and trade relations. Using Thing Theory, I suggested that their animal origin might be brought to the fore and the implicit assumption that matter from a living creature was simply evidence of untrammelled human power come under scrutiny. Ian F. MacInnes, for example, traced the centrality of both the live animals and their dead products in the use and naming of streets in London, arguing persuasively that "Early modern England was not just a nation that turned animals into objects on a large scale; it was a nation that was produced by animals, an animal-made-object-on a national scale."<sup>9</sup>

6 Philo and Wilbert, *Animal Spaces*, 14–23; Despret, "From Secret Agents".

7 Roy, "White Ants", 415.

8 See Brown, "Thing Theory"; Fudge, "Renaissance Animal Things".

9 MacInnes, "Cow-Cross Lane", 86.



This inclusion of the agency of the animal-made-object rather than just the animal has been only one of the ways in which the animal history has shifted its focus over the past sixteen years. But perhaps the most significant development can be found in the various attempts to understand the experiences of the animals of the past themselves. This is something that did not factor into the histories that focused on questions of representation, which assumed that past animals' experiences were not available to us (and I had certainly assumed that). New methods, new cross-disciplinary engagements, however, have offered new opportunities for historians.

Recognizing that other animals engage with the world in a way that is very different from our own has a long history,<sup>10</sup> but it is only in recent years that scholarship has begun to explore what that might mean for how we include the animals of the past in our work. Chris Pearson contemplated the nineteenth-century city through a dog's nose, for example; and Sarah Cockram pondered on the experiences of the pets we see in Italian Renaissance portraiture.<sup>11</sup> What did the touch across species—the hand stroking the animal's head—mean for the human, but also for the dog back then? Such explorations have emerged out of an engagement with work from Sensory History, but also with scholarship from some very different fields of study, including Veterinary Medicine, Animal Welfare Science, and Ethology.<sup>12</sup> Here, current studies of physiology and behaviour undertaken in the presence of living animals are offering possibilities for understanding those long-gone animals of the past.<sup>13</sup>

In an essay from 2017, I wondered “What was it like to be a cow?” No definitive answer can be given, of course (although I would not have been able to give a definitive answer to “What was it like to be a child?” either), but I nevertheless attempted to think about cows’

<sup>10</sup> See Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning*.

<sup>11</sup> Pearson, *Dogopolis*; Cockram, “Sleeve Cat”.

<sup>12</sup> For work on Sensory History, see Smith, “Producing Sense”.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Wemelsfelder, “Science of Friendly Pigs”, and Wemelsfelder et al., “Assessing the ‘Whole Animal’”.

sentience and their particular experiences of the world through an engagement with current animal science.<sup>14</sup> I was not the first to attempt this: in her 2013 history of trained elephants in the nineteenth-century, *Entertaining Elephants*, for example, Susan Nance took us closer to the animals themselves by engaging with studies by contemporary ethologists. And, in an article from 2022, Jonathan Saha took this a step further and read the elephants of Myanmar's past through an ethological and an ecological lens. Elephants' experiences of enforced labour were central to his analysis, but so was the world those elephants created for other creatures—such as for the frogs who might live in the puddles that formed in the elephants' footprints, and whose own security was undermined when the wild elephant populations started to decline.

Such scholarship is a great distance from animal history's first focus on issues of representation and shows how broad the field has become in its methodology as well as in the range of its potential foci. And the unsolvable difficulties that remain central (the impossibility of ever really knowing what it was like to be a cow), alongside the very wide range of possible foci for our research (animals were *everywhere* in the past), mean that it is unlikely that the field will ever stop developing. But one thing is certain: future work will have to take on board, more perhaps than it has in the past, the pressing problems we are facing today. What does it mean for animal history that we are now living in the Anthropocene? What can this work do in response to a recognition of the cosmically destructive power of the human?



The geological transition from Holocene to Anthropocene—the date of which is disputed—reflects the belief that the current epoch can only be understood as having been created by what Chris Otter has termed “deliberate acts of sentient creatures”; that is, by humans.<sup>15</sup> Our species' impact (and, we should of course remember that the actions that have caused change are not equally shared

14 See also Fudge, “Milking Other Men's Beasts”.

15 Otter, “The Anthropocene in British History”, 569.

among all humans<sup>16</sup>) is now so indelible that it can be traced at the level of geology, and so the planet can only be understood today through attending to those human actions.

This focus on the role of *Homo sapiens* might seem to mark a return to a kind of anthropocentrism that animal history has been advocating that we move away from. It might appear, that is, to necessitate a reversion to a concentration on our own species. Otter, however, has rightly written that work in human-animal studies has much to offer to present and future discussions of the planet: “The concept of the Anthropocene [...] essentially argues that the history of human societies cannot be separate from the histories of climate, the life of nonhuman species and the earth’s biogeochemical cycles.”<sup>17</sup> Thinking the Anthropocene, in short, is rethinking the human and its history: it is our implication in our environment, and our being part of a continuum of species that is crucial. Such a claim undoubtedly reinforces the value of animal history, but I think we need to contemplate not only how central animal history might be to discussions about the Anthropocene, but also what it can *do* in the Anthropocene. How can the work of animal historians engage in the ongoing and pressing debates about current human actions and their impact on the planet?

In a roundtable discussion from 2020, organized by the journal *Agricultural History*, when both the Anthropocene and COVID-19 were framing discussions, Sandra Swart offered a suggestion. She spoke of the past as “usefully unfamiliar.”<sup>18</sup> For Swart, animal history can have a role in providing an alternative way forward by offering a view of the past that emphasizes multispecies living. In a piece from 2021 introducing yet another special issue—this time of the *South African Historical Journal*—which focused on environmental history and the Anthropocene, Swart reiterated this sentiment: “historians do what we have always done—we simply point out that *it was not always so*. We make the familiar strange.”<sup>19</sup>

16 On this question see Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time”, 9–11.

17 Otter, “The Anthropocene in British History”, 569.

18 Way et al., “Roundtable: Animal History”, 455.

19 Swart, “At the Edge of the Anthropocene”, 9.

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon takes a very different view in a 2017 article in *The Anthropocene Review*. For him, making the past strange is not enough. A “future prospect” in which “human activity transforms the environmental conditions,” he writes, “creates a demand for preventive action, accompanied by a strong sense of urgency.”<sup>20</sup> Such preventive action requires a wholly new notion of history; one that is non-processual and is, in his words, “capable of recognizing the unprecedented.”<sup>21</sup> The issue, then, is about how — and even if — we can write histories of and in the Anthropocene. For Simon, historicizing the Anthropocene might domesticate it, make it familiar and so remove the sense of urgency that is required in response to it. For that reason our histories need to do something else.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has likewise argued that the recognition that we are now living in the Anthropocene asks us to move in different directions from our established paths; for him, we need to engage with humans as agents in a new way. Where Otter focused on “deliberate acts of sentient creatures,” Chakrabarty sees something rather different that resonates with concerns in earlier animal history: just as animal historians have been rethinking the agency of the non-human, so, for Chakrabarty, the agency of the human needs to be reconsidered. He argues that our current moment “leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once.” These scales, he writes, are the human as “a purposeful biological entity with the capacity to degrade the natural environment,” and humans as “a geophysical force.”<sup>22</sup> The purposeful entity is one that we are familiar with, but the second scale of human agency Chakrabarty proposes, is somewhat alien, and it is in this that he differs from Otter. This conception of agency requires us to figure the single human as also part of a general category — “humans” — which, in turn, needs to be conceived of not so much as a species but as a “geophysical force.” As such, Chakrabarty’s reading undermines our highly valued idea of individuality in a way that Otter’s “sentient creatures” does not quite do. Indeed, for

20 Simon, “Facing the Unprecedented”, 241.

21 Simon, 244.

22 Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies,” 1.



Chakrabarty the conceptualization of humans as a “force” pushes us to think about our own species in ways that are almost inorganic: he suggests that humans possess “some nonhuman, nonliving agency.” And herein lies the problem: “we cannot ever experience ourselves as a geophysical force,” he writes, “though we now know that this is one of the modes of our collective existence.”<sup>23</sup>

Following Chakrabarty’s argument, continuing to write histories of multispecies worlds can no longer be a satisfactory response to the Anthropocene, as there is a danger that such would be telling only half the story — would be ignoring our role as inconceivable “geophysical force”. But how do we write histories that ask our readers to encounter what Chakrabarty calls their own “nonontological agency”?<sup>24</sup> Indeed, can such histories be written? That is a genuine question.

What if we came at this from a different angle and attempted to write animal histories in which the place of humans as purposeful biological entities was recognized as the preferred option — a kind of historical choice so embedded in our sense of self and in our cultures that it has been naturalized to be the Truth (capital T)? This sounds similar to something I proposed back in 2002, when I suggested that animal history might find value in recognizing that the human as an individualizable, intending, agency-full being was a creature constructed by very human work. But I think Chakrabarty’s ideas ask us to go further: he is not thinking about the question of representation, but is addressing very urgent environmental issues. De-individualization can, of course, reiterate the de-humanizations that have haunted the past, and our writing of that past, in its treatment of its Others by dealing in statistics, by generalizing individual experience out of the picture. Such work is not so different from that which Henry Buller has seen in operation in industrial agriculture.<sup>25</sup> Rather, Chakrabarty is inviting us to address a new conception of the human, and as such to write new histories of species.

23 Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies”, 11; italics in original.

24 Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies”, 13.

25 Buller, “Individuation”.

How might this be done? How might we contemplate our species in its interactions with the rest of the natural world in this light? Julia Adeney Thomas offers one suggestion that resonates with work in animal studies, influenced as it has been by Donna Haraway's conception of companion species.<sup>26</sup> Thomas has argued that a "microbiological view of 'the human' forces historians to grapple with the idea that each 'individual' is better understood as a collectivity of species, and 'humanity' as an archipelago of multiple, dependent life forms." But it is not only at the level of individual that we come undone in her analysis. The thing called the human as species can be challenged too. Thomas writes:

While about 99.9 percent of our human DNA is shared, our microbial cells may have as little as 50 percent of their genetic profile in common. From the perspective of human solidarity, this finding is disturbing. If 90 percent of my cells are bacterial and half of those have different DNA sequences than yours, then on a cellular level it is not as clear that we are the "same species," as other branches of biology and most recent histories define us.<sup>27</sup>

This is a kind of defamiliarizing of the human that fits with Swart's conception of the role of history, and perhaps takes it a step further. It begins to uproot — or at least starts to dig up — entrenched understandings of the human as a species and as an individual. It challenges ideas that "we" (an even more hypothetical conception than ever) are separate from animals; that "we" are creatures capable of dominating "our" environment and all the beings in it. Such understandings of human exceptionalism have led us to where we are now: drowning our neighbours, killing our kin, destroying our home. We need, urgently, to reconnect with our planet, and recognize ourselves as inseparable rather than special; reliant upon rather dominating. Chakrabarty and Thomas have raised important questions for us to consider; and pursuing ways of addressing those questions could be what animal history works to do in the Anthropocene.

<sup>26</sup> See Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, "History and Biology", 1595.

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