

2020

[Review] Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfield, editors. Equestrian Cultures: Horse, Humans, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity. Animal Lives Series, University of Chicago Press, 2019. 276 pp.

Wendy Woodward

University of Western Cape, wwoodwar@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj>



Part of the [Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Australian Studies Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Legal Studies Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), [Public Health Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Sociology Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Woodward, Wendy, [Review] Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfield, editors. Equestrian Cultures: Horse, Humans, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity. Animal Lives Series, University of Chicago Press, 2019. 276 pp., *Animal Studies Journal*, 9(2), 2020, 319-321.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol9/iss2/14>

[Review] Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfield, editors. Equestrian Cultures: Horse, Humans, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity. Animal Lives Series, University of Chicago Press, 2019. 276 pp.

Abstract

[Review] Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfield, editors. Equestrian Cultures: Horse, Humans, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity. Animal Lives Series, University of Chicago Press, 2019. 276 pp. Differences in equestrian cultures have recently been brought home to me. My horse moved to a newly established yard which soon developed into one catering only for endurance racing horses. The horses were kept in small pens, only permitted into the stony field every second day. Human attitudes to the horses were functionalist with the horses always for sale to the highest bidder from the UAE. Galahad is back now at a happy hacking yard where the horses stand out all day, graze in green grass and function as a herd. One of his paddock mates, however, is a horse rescued from the notorious bush-racing. Horses, mostly stolen, are drafted into gang culture and raced at night near Cape Town. Three instances of horses living differently, yet always commodified as 'products of modernity' (1), as Guest and Mattfield put it in their introduction.

[Review] Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfield, editors.
 Equestrian Cultures: Horse, Humans, Human Society, and the
 Discourse of Modernity. Animal Lives Series,
 University of Chicago Press, 2019. 276 pp.

Wendy Woodward

University of the Western Cape

Differences in equestrian cultures have recently been brought home to me. My horse moved to a newly established yard which soon developed into one catering only for endurance racing horses. The horses were kept in small pens, only permitted into the stony field every second day. Human attitudes to the horses were functionalist with the horses always for sale to the highest bidder from the UAE. Galahad is back now at a happy hacking yard where the horses stand out all day, graze in green grass and function as a herd. One of his paddock mates, however, is a horse rescued from the notorious bush-racing. Horses, mostly stolen, are drafted into gang culture and raced at night near Cape Town. Three instances of horses living differently, yet always commodified as ‘products of modernity’ (1), as Guest and Mattfield put it in their introduction.

Can the essays in *Equestrian Cultures* make sense of such varying attitudes to horses? Can the collection hold the interest of equine aficionados as well as those who don’t know horses? In the introduction Guest and Mattfield home in on key attitudes to horses in contemporary culture – as metaphors of wildness and freedom. Such romanticism is soon disabused as the essays variously insert horses into different cultures, contemporarily and historically, in ‘reality’ and in art (photography, literature, painting). All these essays engagingly defamiliarise the presence of horses whether in battle or as adjuncts to slavery in North America and the Atlantic.

In Part I on Science and Technology the first essay, ‘Bits and Interspecies Communication in the Eighteenth Century’ with the horses regarded as ‘Machines of Feeling’ speaks to the fact that a human riding a horse, no matter how minimal the bits and other tack, is always already about hierarchy which is contextualised politically. Still, ‘appui’, the co-becoming of horsemanship is possible. The interaction of Mattfield’s essay with the subsequent essay by Donna Landry on ‘Horses at Waterloo’ suggests that an ongoing debate will develop which the reader (this one at least) then anticipated in the subsequent essays. Such engagement and cross-referencing was not sustained, however, which is a pity. Admittedly the first two essays both incorporate similar theories which optimises discussion, but even differences could have been reflected on within this volume. Landry shows how the iconic battle of Waterloo can be interpreted anew via horses, the significance of bloodlines or the soldiers’ nationalised attitudes to their mounts or the centrality of feeling (for horses). Both Landry’s essay and Akilli’s have profound points to make in their respective disciplines for ways of doing research and/or reading. Sinan Akilli’s study of ‘The Agency and the *Matter* of the Dead Horse in the Victorian Novel’ grounds the discussion in the everyday mortality of horse presences in Victorian times.

For Rune Gade the horse photographs of Charlotte Dumas are evidence not only of the bond between photographer and subject but, more generally, of the premodern ‘shared embodiment’ of human and horses. The finely done in-depth analysis of the photographs suggests that Dumas’s horses challenge expectations – the horses in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia rather than being mobile are at rest, vulnerably, in their stables; the feral horses of Nevada do not embody romantic beings on the prairies but live in the interstices of the rural and urban.

In Part 2, Commodification and Consumption, Magdalena Bayreuther and Christine Rüppell consider the ideological status of ornately painted stables decorated built in the eighteenth century at Pommersfelden. The essays connecting horses with their racialized histories are particularly timeous. Charlotte Carrington-Farmer records how the trade in horses and the development of a breed (the Narangasett Pacer) were interconnected with slaveholding and the management of slaves. Jessica Dallow reads the horse portraits of Edward Troye as

‘Narratives of Race and Racehorses’. Dallow’s essay provides a fascinating glimpse into racialized horse-human politics in North America in the early nineteenth century, with the analysis of the portraits expanded by actual life narratives of some of the slaves painted with the horses they groomed or trained (but why does a horse expressing affection have to be second-guessed as an ‘anthropomorphic quality’? (126)). Kristen Guest’s “More Than a Horse”: The Cultural Work of Racehorse Biography’ considers very specifically how these racehorses as exceptional subjects came to stand for modernity. Guest makes the essential point that many biographies fail to take into account, in any substantial way, the realities of the exploitative racing industry in favour of representing an idealised horse hero.

In the final section focusing on National Identity the first essay, ‘Horse Breeding and State Studs in Prussia (1750-1900)’ by Tatsuya Mitsuda details the politics of reproduction in state studs and the difference between the English and the Prussian *modus operandi*. An analysis by Susanna Forrest of a hippophagic banquet in Kansas City shows how eating horses nauseatingly connected to politics, patriotism and stringent economic realities. Kari Weil in ‘Circus Studs and Equestrian Sports in Turn-of-the-Century France’ locates riding in relation to being seen and seeing. Men on horses were central to this shift in both Paris and Prussia in relation to ideas about aristocracy and the male body. Isa Menzies deftly analyses the environmental controversies in relation to brumbies in Australia, showing how these horses have been enlisted in the heritage debate to stand for a sense of ‘belonging’ for Australians of Anglo-European descent, and how fictional texts have been used to justify the presence of brumbies in environmentally sensitive areas.

Equestrian Cultures is a substantial, edifying collection, persuasive and informative for horse scholars and for researchers in Human-Animal Studies, as well as for historians and horse aficionados. The essays variously locate horse-human relationships within the dualities of modernity while focusing specifically on how the presence of horses may dislocate modernity. Perhaps a follow-up volume could build on the scholarship here, considering horses in other parts of the world and including horses within discourses of criminality.