



Of Horses and Men, Mules and Labourers. Human-Animal Semantics, Practices and Cultures in the Early Modern Caribbean

De caballos y hombres, mulas y trabajadores.
Semántica humano-animal, prácticas y culturas
en el Caribe colonial

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| Abstract: The aim of this essay is to discuss two human-animal relationships that proved particularly salient in the early stages of the so-called Spanish Conquest and became dominant in the early modern Caribbean and colonial Mexican world. On the one hand, the conquistadors' narratives stressed the importance of their horses, and the figure of the conquistador riding on his horse became an iconic depiction of centauric superiority. The conquistadorial mounted couple contrasts starkly with an equally iconic human-animal relationship: the muleteer and the mule. Depicting labour as a collective of human and animal workforce challenged the social boundaries between what was considered human and animal in yet another historically relevant way. This article, therefore, stresses an approach that takes modes of interaction as a starting point to discuss body history in early modern Amerindian contexts beyond strict human/animal boundaries.

| Keywords: Human/animal studies; Body history; Modes of interaction; Early modern horsemanship; Labour history.

| Resumen: Este ensayo tiene como objetivo discutir dos interacciones entre lo humano y lo animal particularmente relevantes en las primeras fases de la conquista hispana de los espacios americanos que se convirtieron en dominantes tanto en el Caribe como en el México

colonial. Por un lado, las narraciones de los conquistadores enfatizaron la importancia de los caballos y la figura del conquistador a lomos de su montura devino en una representación icónica de la superioridad centáurica. La “pareja montada” conquistadora contrasta fuertemente con otra relación entre lo humano y lo animal igualmente icónica: el muletero y la mula. La representación del trabajo como un colectivo combinado de fuerza de trabajo humana y animal desafiaba las fronteras sociales entre lo que se podía considerar humano y lo que se podía considerar animal en una forma histórica relevante. Esta discusión por ello, pone el acento en una aproximación al tema que toma las formas de interacción como punto de partida a partir del cual discutir la historia del cuerpo en contextos amerindios coloniales más allá de las estrictas fronteras humano/animal.

Palabras clave: Relación humano/animal; Historia del cuerpo; Formas de interacción, Equitación colonial; Historia del trabajo.

*“The donkey for the indian,
the mule for the mulatto
and the horse for the gentleman”*

*“El burro para el indio,
la mula para el mulato
y el caballo para el caballero”*

Old Mexican proverb (19th c.)¹

INTRODUCTION

Donkeys, mules and horses have been part of the cultural and social landscape of the Caribbean for only a little more than 500 years, and yet, they have played important roles in the social fabric that constitutes Mesoamerican history. This article takes up a challenge put forward by Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici as they called for “centering animals” in Latin American history (Few/Tortorici 2013). By centring animals, the aim is not to de-centre the human actors very much constitutive of historiographical work, but to focus on their common workings and dealings together and to detect historical settings where this common interaction became more significant than a daily routine.

In what follows, I will present two human-animal configurations that proved particularly salient in the early stages of the so-called Spanish Conquests and became dominant in the early modern Caribbean world: The conquistador and his horse on the one hand, and the labourer and the mule on the other. By looking at the modes of interaction of these two social figures, we can avoid the rather traditional question of agency, but we might also detect more than mere symbolic arrangements. Although

¹ As cited in Pérez Martínez (2004, 105).

agency has been a major concept in the history of slavery and in the vast field of animal studies, it might not be the ideal approach to analyse the role the two specific kinds of animals (i.e. horse and mule) played in the world of labour and war. The point of this paper is not to raise horses and mules to the morally charged grounds of agents of forced labour and conquest. What might prove an illuminating approach, however, is the question of when and how specific animals added physically, relationally and symbolically to social orders. Therefore, instead of postulating agencies as such, it is the intention of this paper to take up recent suggestions from social studies to analyse “modes of interaction”.² By choosing modes of interaction that can be considered socially and culturally relevant, the focus is no longer on more or less defined groups, but on the social regimes which establish this particular order. Social border regimes regulate who (or what) is included and excluded. As has been pointed out by recent sociological and social historical research, angels and demons can be considered as actual social actors in most European premodern societies³ because their effects were treated as socially relevant doings (Lindemann 2014). In the same sense, it might prove fruitful not to start with a presupposed dualism which divides humans from animals or westerners from indigenous. Today the basic understanding is that the great divide between nature and culture that has been dominant for at least the last 200 years of intellectual, but also political thinking is now challenged by acknowledging alternative categorizations of the world. As Philippe Descola has rightly pointed out, this divide is not easy to bridge, but the least historians studying early modern actors’ doings and sayings can do is to critically reflect and not to presuppose oppositions and analytical categories relevant in their field of work (Descola 2010; 2011, 77-84). At the same time, Laura Derby published an article, in which she argued for the inclusion of quadrupeds within the environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean: “[B]ringing animals into the analysis might move us closer to local understandings of the natural world and syncretism on the ground between European, indigenous, and creole views and practices, enabling new ways of thinking about environmental change” (Derby 2011, 603). Therefore, instead of opposing humans and animals in the early modern Caribbean and in what would be called New Spain, I propose an approach via socially relevant configurations.

I have chosen two configurations which were relevant in two different social spheres, namely the world of the elite and of labour. Marcy Norton, a leading expert on the early modern Atlantic World, has recently suggested that there were two predominant (premodern) European inter-species relationships: hunting and

² The most influential proposal for analyzing the social as relational structures has been made by Bruno Latour and other proponents of ANT (Latour 2007). Yet, for animal studies it is Donna Haraway’s approach on relationship duos which has proven most fruitful (Haraway 2003). Similar suggestions have been made, for example, by Vinciane Despret who calls for “agencement” instead of individual agencies (Despret 2013) or Marcy Norton whose analyses focus on “modes of interaction” (Norton 2015).

³ Gesa Lindemann systematizes the analytical framework for social border regimes and she suggests analyzing social orders by starting at their borders (Lindemann 2009; 2014).

husbandry (Norton 2015, 29; Norton 2017, 17-19). Because of their relevance for premodern societies, these two main forms of relationship between human and non-human actors should be regarded as organizing principles for social and cultural order. However, these two binary principles should not be implicitly assumed for non-European societies (Descola 1994). Taking the Carib term “iegue” as a case in point, Norton elaborates on the different binaries in use when humans are interacting with animals. Whereas the conquering Spanish had rather clear-cut concepts of “vassal animals” used for hunting and war (e.g. horses and dogs) and “livestock” for thoroughly domesticated animals such as cattle, sheep or pigs, the boundary of interspecies interaction in several Caribbean and Mesoamerican cultures ran along the gradual difference between wild and tame (Norton 2015, 29-30). Interestingly enough, the wild/tame binary could become such a governing principle of social order that it crossed the human/non-human binary. “Iegue”, therefore, does not only refer to a tamed animal, but also to an adopted and socially integrated human being (Norton 2014, 30).

By focusing on elite and labour positions, I deviate from Marcy Norton’s hunting/husbandry binary, but for a specific reason. Labour and its constitutive ingrained power structures, on the one hand, and fighting and its likewise constitutive logic of victory/defeat are highly physical. If we consider fighting and labouring as powerful cultural practices, the body and its functions, possibilities and limitations play a central role. The physical body as site of practices offers one of the most promising approaches to human-animal relationships. Unlike complex language, narrative and visual representation or cultural symbolism, the body and its physical properties are shared qualities of both human and non-human animals. Yet, it is important to stress that I do not argue for an essentialization of the body *per se*. The focus on the body as locus of practices and the bodies’ role to fulfil social tasks includes a sensibility for the semantics and discourses creating the body. Problematising the question of how (historically) produced is the central concern here. If we understand, from a historical point of view, how bodies were used and described, we might learn more about the cultural and social differentiation within different societies or –more generally– collectives. Taking up this line of argumentation, Daniel Eitler has recently put forward several suggestions as to how animal history could be written as body history (Eitler 2014). One of his suggestions is to include only animals that actually form relationships –however brief or sporadic– with humans and “whose modes of existence have been traceably influenced by humans” (Eitler 2014, 261). This suggestion is worth taking up for post-Columbian Caribbean and Mesoamerican contexts, especially because here “cross-cultural encounters” are even more prevalent as research focus (Hallam/Street 2000; Smith/Tagirova/Engman 2010). By changing the focus from intra- and interspecific encounters to the modes of existence of their relationships, we also have to take into account that “to critically historicize the actor- or subject-status of humans and animals is a necessary aspect of research into the ways in which they were produced, and not just the ways in which they were represented” (Eitler 2014, 265).

I would like to take up the “production” part by focusing on two bodily activities which blurred the human/animal boundaries in specific ways. At the same time, they both relate to forms of concrete bodily activity with ingrained power structures: Fighting and labouring. Whereas the almost iconic conquistador on his horse stood for the superiority of the Spanish conquerors, the equally emblematic human-animal analogy of the labouring human and mule workforce entails social inferiority. Whereas conquistadorial fighting is characterised by rider-horse-ensembles, labouring is mainly set into hierarchical structures of dependency where the boundaries between labouring humans and animals are blurred. It is necessary to stress at this point that the conceptual questioning of human/animal boundaries is quintessential to re-evaluate the differences, analogies and relationships early modern contemporaries used and created. And very often they did so out of different motives and representational needs. Therefore, it needs a very sensitive approach to not simply reproduce demeaning contemporary antagonisms between, for example, “the indigenous” and “the Spanish”, or analogies, as, for example, between “slaves” and “animals”.

This article is divided into two parts followed by conclusive remarks on human-animal history as body history. In the first part, I will focus on the early conquest setting in the Caribbean and the Spanish Mexican campaign led by Hernán Cortés, in which the conquistadorial riding unit became the centre of attention, especially for Spanish commentators. In the following chapter, I will shift from early conquest contexts to the colonial development leading up to the 18th century *casta* society in early modern Mexico. In contrast to the iconic rider/riding horse unit, I will introduce a different mode of interaction between equine and human co-workers in the colonial labour setting. In order to highlight labour as a plausible approach to animal history as body history, I will combine textual and visual sources ranging from the 15th to the 18th century.

THE CENTAURIC CONQUISTADORIAL COUPLE

Historical accounts of how indigenous Caribbean spectators reacted to their first encounters with European horses are abundant. The descriptions of the horror and fascination of people who had never before laid eyes on a quadruped animal of that size seem not only to take up a major part of Spanish contemporary accounts, but also to fulfil a specific function of thinking about appearances, of interpreting success and of discussing domination and superiority. It has been pointed out repeatedly, though, that we should take Spanish anecdotes of how indigenous audiences thought of horses with more than just a grain of salt. In these anecdotes, the indigenous spectators are said to think of horses as supernatural deer or monstrous carnivores. The indigenous reactions are therefore not rendered as descriptions of their actual interpretations, but as Spanish self-fashioning of their heroic or even god-like appearance (Restall 2003;

Townsend 2002).⁴ This self-stylization is closely connected to the kind of documents used as sources (Folger 2011).⁵ The early phase of the Spanish Conquista in the Caribbean and Mesoamerican territories is mainly related through *probanzas* (proofs of merit), *relaciones de méritos y servicios* (reports on services rendered and merits), *cartas* (letters) and *historias*. The historical chronicles in particular were usually written down at a later stage and the authors of these historical accounts can seldom be characterized as eye-witnesses. As for Caribbean and Mesoamerican accounts of interpretations during the early phase of the Spanish conquests, the textual and visual sources are even more scarce.

Interestingly enough, though, research into the role of the horse in the “New World” had a peculiar peak in the first half of the 20th century. The works of Robert B. Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936) and Robert M. Denhardt (1912-1989) are still cited as main references for the horse in the early modern Americas.⁶ At a closer look, though, both approaches reveal distinct problems for today’s approach to the role of animals in history. Cunninghame Graham, for instance, was a passionate horse lover, colourful character and adventurer and he set out his book *Los caballos de la conquista* (1930) as an equestrian tale of heroic adventure. In particular, the 1946 edition with watercolour drawings and vignettes by Enrique Castell Capurro highlights the iconic superiority of the mounted Spanish conquistador over the trampled down indigenous adversaries. Although the book is still referenced in the context of historical animal studies today, it must be read in its own historical terms.⁷ It is not a book on the role of horses in the conquest, but rather a male adventure story of the 1930s with cowboys’ and gauchos’ ultimate companion animal, the horse, in a lead role.

Robert D. Denhardt’s work on horses in the Americas from the 1950s, on the other hand, represents rather the opposite: not a tale of heroic horseback fight, but a meticulous reference collection of already edited sources. Denhardt’s achievement, therefore, was to collect references to the earliest horses on the Caribbean islands in order to document the arrival and subsequent distribution of horses in the Americas. Whereas Cunninghame Graham’s and Denhardt’s interest was rooted in their background and their awareness of the diminishing importance of the horse in 20th century society⁸, research in the 1970s started to focus on cultural and ecological impacts of the Spanish conquest. In the wake of Alfred W. Crosby’s *Columbian Exchange* (1972) horses were not discussed as such, but as an important “factor” in the conquest. This factoralism put horses in the same category as firearms, steel and germs (Diamond 1997; Restall/Lane 2011).

⁴ For the general subject and analysis of conquest myths cf. Restall (2003).

⁵ Robert Folger was one of the first who dealt with *probanzas* and *relaciones* not just as sources, but as means of self-fashioning cf. Folger (2011).

⁶ Quite tellingly, Daniel Vidart’s study on the effect of horses in indigenous societies has hardly been cited (Vidart 1958).

⁷ See, for example, the reference in Few/Tortorici (2013, 5-6).

⁸ For the gradual separation of human society and the horse see Raulff (2015).

Not least because of Denhardt's meticulous research, we do know that horses were first shipped to the Caribbean islands in 1493, on Christopher Columbus' second voyage. The transatlantic shipping of horses was mainly initiated by Columbus himself. In the late spring of 1493, a royal *cedula* instructed the *secretarius* to recruit 20 horsemen (*escuderos de caballo*) from Granada together with their horses. Since it was quite common for *escuderos* to ride stallions,⁹ the order also included the demand for five mares.¹⁰ Aware of the considerable difficulties concerning the transatlantic shipment of horses, the idea to found a stud and to initiate equine reproduction on the newly discovered islands was already developed in the first months of preparation. What becomes obvious from Columbus' voyages to the Indies following the "discovery" journey is that he was concerned with settlement and the establishment of Spanish rule in *las Indias*. Horses were not part of the more common livestock, but were essential to a military class who defined themselves as riders and horse-owners and used the status of possessing a horse as a clear distinction from common footmen. Included in his many letters to the Crown, there is one in which Columbus requested the king to authorize the taking of additional ships to be used in transporting the horses. In answer to this request the king wrote that finances would not permit the sending of more vessels, but he suggested that, if necessary, some other supplies might be left behind in order to make room for the horses.

In the classic narratives of the early conquest following Columbus' voyages to the Indies, horses are generally referred to as wondrous beings. The Spaniards made ready use of the fact that the islands' inhabitants and especially the local rulers had never seen horses before. Guillermo Coma, for example, took part in the second voyage and the Aragonese nobleman's letter from the Indies was the first published pamphlet relating the news from the isles across the Atlantic to a larger public. The letter was sent to Coma's correspondents in Pavia, where the printer and editor Nicolò Syllacio had it published in a revised Latin version in 1494.¹¹ The so-called Syllacio-Coma Letter was modified as a textual hybrid to be sold to the broader public and gives a lot of details about the voyage, the newly discovered islands, their population, climate, flora and fauna. In one of its most famous passages, the letter elaborates on the Spaniards' meeting with the *cacique* Goathanari, the local authority. As the presence of an estimated 600 armed *indi* was not a very comforting situation for the Spaniards, they were keen on showing off their fleet and their horses:

When this alarm subsided and confidence was restored, Goathanari came down to the shore to see the ships. When there, he admired the lofty bulwarks, examined the tackle of the ships, observed attentively the instruments of iron, but fixed his eyes most upon the horses, of which the Indians are destitute. A great number of fine horses –fleet for the

⁹ Unlike today's English or German language use, which mainly differentiates between stallions, geldings and mares, the Spanish languages in the 15th and 16th century only use *caballo* for male horses and *yegua* for females.

¹⁰ Cf. De Cárdenas y Espejo et al. (1864, vol. 1. XIX, 449, and XXI, 310). Hereafter cited as DII.

¹¹ The letter is edited in its printed version and with an English translation in Thacher (1967, 223-262).

course and strong to bear armour— had been brought out by the Spaniards. These horses had plated bits, housings of gay colours, and straps highly polished. The formidable appearance of these animals was not without terror to the Indians; for they suspected that they fed on human flesh. (Thacher 1967, 256)

The Spaniards' approach to introducing the horse to this new horse-free world was from the beginning a multi-layered endeavour. What the Goathanari passage reveals is that the Spanish leaders very quickly understood that horses (and other impressive weapons such as firearms) could make an effective first impression. We can only fantasize about how it must have been for Goathanari and his entourage to see animals the size of several men prancing and neighing right in front of them. The horses were not just brought out of the ships' holds to get fresh air and solid ground under their hooves after several weeks of transport, but they were dressed up to cause a spectacle. The reference to horses as carnivores and —more specifically— as devourers of human flesh was taken up by several Spanish commentators and it became a standard myth. In order to spread terror among indigenous adversaries, some resourceful Spaniards told stories of how horses could chase and catch human beings (Díaz del Castillo [Barbón Rodríguez] 2005, 160).

Using shams including horses was also an effective tactical move in Hernán Cortés' conquest of today's Mexico in 1519. Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la nueva España* offers one of the most detailed observations of the Spanish conquest of "Mexico".¹² In Díaz' writing the conquistadors' military, logistic and tactical awareness of their dependency on the horses' well-being becomes most evident.¹³ Written four decades after the Mexican conquest campaign led by Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz' first-hand account was aimed at revising the circulating dominant narrative, but nonetheless gives us valuable insight into how the military campaign was organised. In 1518, the Governor of Cuba, Diego Velazquez, ordered 10 ships to be prepared for the voyage to the Mesoamerican mainland. This fleet was therefore bigger than previous exploring expeditions with usually only about 4 light vessels. Since the expedition was officially planned for permanent settlement of the mainland, a large crew, major supply of salted pork and cassava¹⁴ bread and as many horses as could be bought had to be organised. Finally, 508 soldiers, 100 seamen and 16 horses were shipped off to the Mexican shore. For Bernal Díaz, the horses were of special importance. He does not just mention that horses were still rare in West Indies, especially Cuba, but he goes even further in actually listing the

¹² Written as a first-hand account of the events, Díaz' text was conceived as a corrective version in answer to Francisco López de Gómar's tendentious biography of Hernán Cortés (*historia verdadera*). Bernal Díaz started to work on the *historia* in the 1550s, probably after Gómar's biography was published in 1552. He revised the text several times and finally, long after Díaz' death in 1584, a revised copy of the Guatemala manuscript was sent to be published in Spain in 1632 (Barbón Rodríguez 2005, I-IX).

¹³ For the most recent critical edition cf. Barbón Rodríguez (2005).

¹⁴ Cassava bread is made from yuca or manioc and rich in carbohydrates. Judging from its nutritional value it was also used to feed the horses (Karasch 2000).

16 horses including their characteristics, qualities, owners and –in some cases– even their names.¹⁵

In light of this, it is not altogether astonishing that Bernal Díaz relates a lot more about the individual horses than about the individual human participants. Details are given about noblemen and their horses, not about the footmen. Although Díaz was not one of the 16 horsemen, he was very perceptive of the problems involving horses. He describes how Cortés inspected the horses before their departure and how he ordered “los cavallos estubiensen a punto” (Díaz del Castillo [Barbón Rodríguez] 2005, 64). When the fleet finally landed at *Punta de los Palmares* on 12 March 1519, there were instant skirmishes with the local indigenous troops.¹⁶ Cortés had to order the horses to be brought ashore, but “estaban muy torpes y temerosos en el corer, como avía muchos días qu’estaban en los navíos; y otro día estubieron sueltos” (Díaz del Castillo [Barbón Rodríguez] 2005, 80).

What these narrative accounts show is that horses were not only valued as military factors, but that for contemporaries, the organisation, preparation, transportation and adaptation of horses was described as a major challenge on the one hand, but also as an irreducible condition of Iberian conquest practices, on the other. What becomes obvious in accounts such as Bernal Díaz’ is that horses were not just prestigious markers of status, but that social and economic status could not be separated from owning and riding a horse. In a hierarchical society such as the Iberian, visibility and appearance was an integral part of social life (Ruiz 2012; Cañeque 2004). Royal courtiers, but also local noblemen and urban elites relied on riding. We should not forget that appearing mounted on a horse, usually surrounded or followed by other riders, was not just symbolically, but also very physically perceivable as an impressive statement of superiority. In the Late Middle Ages, an essential part of Iberian culture and tradition had integrated horses and equestrian skills: from Reconquista celebrations to royal entries, from urban city council presentations to tournaments (Ruiz 2012; Ruiz 2017; Fuchs 2009). And more generally, the ideal of knighthood itself is centred around the idea of the mounted warrior (Fallows 2010). The Spanish nobleman, *el caballero*, defines himself not just semantically through his companionship with the horse, the *caballo*.¹⁷ As the ideals of nobility and equestrian skills permeated Iberian culture, the military value of the knights and their valiant steeds diminished (Fallows 2010, 305-309). To cut this complex story short, the conquistadorial attitude in the Caribbean and American world was in many ways not part of a new, ground-breaking conquest movement, but a revival and re-evaluation of old, sometimes even nostalgic knighthood ideals and closely connected to social and hierarchical order (Flores Hernández 1997; Renton 2017).

¹⁵ Díaz goes on in his account to report that Juan Sedeño’s chestnut mare actually foaled on board (*esta yegua parió en el navío*), (Barbón Rodríguez 2005, 60).

¹⁶ There had been at least two expeditions along the Mexican coastline in which Bernal Díaz –unlike Hernán Cortés himself– had participated and they had caused several armed conflicts.

¹⁷ For early modern practice and theory of nobility cf. Lee (2016).

In many ways, there was also a revival of a classic figure: the centaure. The antique wise creature with an upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse had been present in mythological, but also hippological texts (Atwood Lawrence 1994). Although medieval map drawings and descriptions featured wondrous beasts like the unicorn or hybrid monsters like cynocephali and manticores to populate and mark the end of the rims of the known world (Mancall 2018, 1-41), the centaur was usually considered a more sophisticated figure. Mentioned not only in the Iliad but also in many popular tales, the most famous example is Chiron. In various different versions, the wisest of all centaurs taught Greek heroes such as Achilles, Perseus, Hercules or Asclepius. References to these heroes and to medical science (Asclepius) are scattered throughout medieval and early modern hippological and hippiatric texts. The centaur myth in the Caribbean and Latin American conquest context, however, was actively re-vitalized. Spanish commentators wrote about how horsemen were taken for centaurs by the indigenous audience, even to the point of ignoring the fact that said spectators would not have heard about Chiron or centaurs in the first place.¹⁸ Bernal Díaz put the centauric trope into more physical terms: “E aquí creyeron los indios que cavallo y el cavallero era todo uno, como jamás avian visto cavallos.” (Díaz del Castillo [Barbón Rodríguez] 2005, 83). The phrasing “todo uno” is not only a reference to the antique centaur myth, but transcends the hybrid human-animal figure by a unified body as central unit of appearance.

From the point of view of historiography, the myth of equine impression was also transported in later times' works on the history of conquest. William H. Prescott's influential *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1844), for example, entrenched the centaur myth even further, when he took up the interpretation that the Mexicans thought the Spanish cavalry was a group of centaurs (Prescott 1844, 181). Only in the last twenty years has historical research stressed more prominently that the idea of the god-like Spaniards and their supposedly overwhelming appearance on god-like creatures has been predominantly shaped by Spanish self-fashioning and by the subsequent more or less direct translation into historiography (Townsend 2003). Whereas centauric and religious elements clearly influenced the Spaniards' perception, the actual physical co-movement of horse and rider cannot be ignored as it was the principle underlying the very idea of riding.

THE OTHER CENTAURIC PACT: SLAVING LIKE A MULE

In his seminal argument in *The Columbian Exchange* (1972), Alfred W. Crosby put the horses' status in a succinct phrase: “The horse the caballero rode was as much an

¹⁸ A prominent case is Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía's account of the Spanish campaign in Mexico in the 1520s. He recounts how locals thought the riders and their riding horses were single beings (centaurs). And only after a few days, so he writes, did they find out that man and horse were two separate beings. Lacking the specific words, they called the horses *mazatl* (deer), (Motolinía 1988, 193-194).

aristocrat in the equestrian flesh as his master was in equestrian skill” (Crosby 2003 [1972], 80). The mule, on the other hand, has got a different and hardly visible story. By taking up Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s central thesis, the essential impact of domestic animals in the early modern American sphere of living has to be extended from the ecological landscape to the level of social interaction (Anderson 2004). Although we can assume that the mule was almost literally the backbone of Spanish economy much throughout the late Middle Ages and the early modern age, there is hardly any research on mules and they are not easy to spot in source material. Whereas Christopher Columbus reportedly made arrangements for horses to be brought to *las Indias* and conquistadorial campaigners such as Bernal Díaz paid close attention to the few horses in their surroundings, mules and donkeys were seldom commented upon in the first years of the Spanish conquest. But there is no doubt that they must have been bred and raised on the Caribbean islands right from the beginning. It is only in the context of the painstaking transport of extra burdens during the conquest campaign in Mexico, when Bernal Díaz mentions the problem that only a few conquistadors had brought carriers with them and that the troop’s majority were worse off than pack animals: “For when a beast had finished its day’s work, its saddle was taken off and it was given food and rest, but we carried our arms and wore our sandals both night and day” (Díaz del Castillo [Cohen] 1963, 158).

Unlike the horse, the mule was never considered a noble animal. As sterile offspring of a male donkey and a female horse, the hybrid mule is a “cultural invention” (Leighton 1967) and had been one of the main issues of farming and husbandry treatises since the widely circulated texts by Cato (234-149 BCE), Varro (116-27 BCE) or Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) (Epstein 2012, 42; Leighton 1967). Yet, mules were considered sturdier and usually more comfortable riding animals than horses. In addition, they could be used both as riding and transport animals. When the shortage of equids in the early years of the Spanish settlement project on Hispaniola demanded for labour force, Christopher Columbus resorted to a novel way of treating equine possession. Traditionally, there was a strong possessory tie between *caballeros* and their own *caballos*. In military as well as in “private” contexts, the possession, use and care of equids was part of one’s own household right. When Columbus had to arrange for the large and complex settlement project on Hispaniola, he had to deal with the fact that if a horse owner was absent or sick, it also meant that this person’s horse was out of action. In addition, some of the horses brought to *las Indias* were not bred for military or laborious use, but for sport and show, a problem also mentioned in Bernal Díaz’ list of horses. Therefore, Christopher Columbus sought to dissolve the strong traditional possessory tie between *caballeros* and *caballos* and he demanded a royal “right of disposal” for the use of horses in the Indies.¹⁹ Furthermore, he also tried to establish a constant horse shipping routine and to reserve ships for equine transport use only, but he only succeeded partially.

¹⁹ See e.g. DII (XXI: 377).

Although the mules are almost totally absent in these sources, two points might be hidden in the overly-documented equine cases. First of all, Columbus initiated the breeding of horses on Hispaniola and so the second voyage included the shipment of mares. In order to breed mules, you need male donkeys, but also female horses. The mares could not only be used to establish horse breeding, but also mule breeding.²⁰ Second, it becomes clear that the need for transport animals on the isles was so prevalent that horses, mules and donkeys had to be incorporated in the new labour regimes.

In what follows, I would like to focus on two main areas of research, where mules played culturally and socially an important role, but where they also gained visibility. First, there is the hybrid status and the close semantic relationship between *mulo* and *mulato*. The breeding of mules, the importance of blood lines and physical characteristics were closely connected to the Spanish discourses on blood purity and impurity. Second, the mule and the muleteer developed a special relationship in the Caribbean and Mesoamerican socio-economic landscape. As a workforce relationship between pack animal and labourer, the mule-muleteer configuration enabled –throughout the early modern period– the long-distance connections and trade needed to establish the economic integration of these territories (Hassig 1985).

As already pointed out, the mule is a hybrid species. Authors of natural philosophy have commented extensively upon this special cross-breed of horse and donkey. Famously sterile, the mule was eponymous for mixture and thus, per natural law, an *bigenerus contra naturam*, as Isidor of Seville famously put it (Epstein 2012, 46-47). This was in accordance with the biblical argument against hybridization as stated prominently in Leviticus 19:19: “Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind”. Ancient and medieval authors used the mule to reflect on the question of what is in harmony with nature and what is not, and the mule provided a context in which questions of purity, inheritability and blood could be discussed and reflected upon. For Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), for example, the mule was a “convenient tool for the logical analysis of species and creation” (Epstein 2012, 52). Ancient and medieval texts see the etymological origin of the word *mulus* in the Greek word for pulling or “traction” and it is therefore not surprising that the mule’s capability for laborious work and transportation were highlighted (Epstein 2012, 50-53).

In his study on racial difference in early colonial Mexico, Robert C. Schwaller points out that the most often cited etymological reference for the word *mulato* was derived from *mula* (Schwaller 2016, 45-46). This discursive proximity also transported the negative connotation of the mule as “peculiar” and “odd” mixture *contra naturam*. The mixture of blood and bodily fluids of two different species was not only regarded as an act of impurity, but it also meant that the offspring of such a

²⁰ See DII (XIX: 449; XXI: 310).

union was inferior, ugly and impure. In a cultural context where the association between genealogy and the physical body was so strong, “blood purity modelled a kind of body-based power relationship” in the colonial territories and innate ancestral inheritance of superiority was “registered physically in one’s blood” (Burk 2017, 173, 174).

Schwaller has shown that, over the course of the sixteenth century, the Spanish started to restrict the exploitation of native transporters, the so-called *tamemes*. Due to rising criticism, the transport networks were forced to exchange human transporters for equine pack animals, which in turn led to the rise of the muleteering business (Schwaller 2016, 199). It is therefore not at all surprising that the single most common professional field for *mestizos* and *mulatos* became that of muleteer (Schwaller 2016, 198). Apart from mining, the rural economy demanded for labour in the farming and transport sector. Muleteering, therefore, could be regarded as rather attractive work as it offered a direct connection between rural areas and urban trade networks. Muleteering was a rather well-paid occupation and the wages varied according to the labourer’s *género* (Schwaller 2016, 199). In the 1720s, Felipe Díez de Palacio introduced a regime of forced distribution of animals to establish and maintain vast ranches for cattle and horses in Tlalmanalco in the Valley of Mexico. The corresponding labour was assigned to unrecompensed service of three indigenous labourers per week (Gibson 1964, 95). The co-labour of indigenous and African (forced) labourers and “livestock” has to be considered a major shift in the Amerindian socio-cultural “modes of interaction”. Although, legal possession of mules or donkeys by indigenous parties before the 18th century is scarcely documented, it was (again) Bernal Díaz del Castillo (ca. 1490s-1581) who spoke of the establishment of a genuine class of “Indian muleteers” (*arrieros*) (Gibson 1964, 345).

It is one of the standard tropes in colonial narratives that the hierarchy between Spanish elites, mulato labourers and indigenous workforce was not only mirrored, but very often rendered as analogy, in the hierarchy between horse, mule and donkey.

As horses were highly capital-intensive investments, mules were less so, but still expensive in acquisition and upkeep. Mules, therefore, were not usually owned by their muleteers. Unlike the conquistadorial rider/riding horse configuration which was based on social status, skill and possessory ties, the muleteering business followed a different kind of human-animal relationship. The pack trains consisted of several dozen mules and usually also several muleteers. Not the individual pairing was the dominant form, but the muleteering group (Hassig 1985, 193; Calderón 1995, 450).

Apart from economic sources, it is not an easy task to find explicit references to the labour relationship between mules and human workforce. Interestingly enough, though, cultural research on the visual culture of race, social differentiation and *mestizaje* has since the 1990s focused on slave portraiture and so-called *casta* paintings (Katzew 1996a; 1996b; 2004; Carrera 2003; 2009; Dean/Leibsohn

2003; Deans-Smith 2005; Lugo-Ortiz/Rosenthal 2013; Cline 2015; Earle 2016). A total of more than 100 full or partial series of *casta* paintings from the early modern period have been counted (Deans-Smith 2005, 169). *Casta* paintings are part of a visual culture that classified and characterized human beings according to *casta*, their presumed shared blood lineage. Culminating in 18th century New Spain, the reigning idea of social composition was based on the belief in different castas and the racial mixing of New Spain's inhabitants (Amerindians, Spaniards, Africans) (Katzew 2004). It was stated that the hierarchically structured society was comprised of different "races" and different "mixtures" between them. The different *castas*, in turn, were attributed with specific socio-economic positions and functions defined almost exclusively by "race" (Katzew 1996a, 8; Vinson 2017, 1-2). Research on *casta* paintings has mainly focused on their role in creating identities and in representing societal order. So far, the role of animals in *casta* paintings and the meaning of animals set alongside different castas, such as *mestizos*, *castizas*, *lobos* or *sambaigos*, has not yet been taken into account. Yet, if—as the major part of *casta* painting research stresses—*casta* paintings were a visually potent and effective instrument to project societal order, the role of animals should not be underestimated as simple adornment (Carrera 2009).

The famous *casta* series by Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768), one of the most acclaimed New Spain painters, portrays *casta* families in their contexts of living (Martí Cotarelo 1999). The series originally consisted of 16 oil-on-canvas paintings, although only 15 are currently known.²¹ In painting no. 15, Miguel Cabrera depicts *coyote*, the *casta* assigned to the children of a *mestizo* and an *india* (see fig. 1). Like the *casta mulato* is etymologically derived from an animal (i.e. the hybrid mule), *coyote* is also a direct reference to an animal. Interestingly enough, the Spanish quickly adopted the Nahuatl word *coyōtl* for the *canis latrans*. In Nahuatl, *coyōtl* is not only used to name the animal as such, but also bears the meaning of trickster and, more generally, "mixture" (Weigle 1996, 364-366). The *casta* order therefore not only adopts names of animal species for human social categories, but also transports their negative connotation of impurity. As Illona Katzew has pointed out, the mixture of Spanish and African blood which resulted in *mulato* was considered "uglier and stranger" than other castas and the connotation reinforced the belief that *mulatos* had "the nature of the mule" (Katzew 2004, 43). In Cabrera's *casta* painting, one of the *coyote* children rides on a donkey led by the *mestizo* father. The animal most closely associated with one of the lowest ranking castas (no. 15 of 16) was not even the mule, but the hierarchically even lower positioned, less valuable donkey.

Another Mexican *casta* oil painting series by an unknown painter (late 18th c.) goes even further and positions mules and donkeys more prominently to highlight the

²¹ Eight canvases are in the Museo de América (Madrid), five are in a private collection in Monterrey (Mexico) and the one introduced here is in the Multicultural Music and Art Foundation of Northridge (California), cf. Katzew (2015).



Fig. 1: *De Mestizo y d India, Coyote*, oil on canvas painting by Miguel Cabrera (Mexico, 1763).

(Elisabeth Waldo-Dentzel Collection, Multicultural Music and Art Foundation of Northridge, California).

castas' characteristics (see fig. 2 and 3). Here, the racial differentiation is quite exclusively reflected in the presence of animals. In the *lobo* painting (fig. 2), muleteering and mule labour in a mill are depicted as natural context. Although we should not take the scene as a realistic depiction, it is characteristic of casta paintings to evoke not just the categorization of race mixture, but to offer a social order where a society

comprised of different castas can be put in socio-economic frameworks. And here, the animals as co-labourers come into view. It might be quite significant that muleteering and grinding work are depicted as workloads for a human-mule ensemble. An interesting shift, though, can be detected if we add the *sambaiga* painting to the series and



Fig. 2: *De negro e india sale lobo*, casta painting, painter unknown (Mexico, ca. 1780). (Malú and Alejandro Escandón Collection).



Fig. 3: *De lobo y india sale sambaiga*, casta painting, painter unknown (Mexico, ca. 1780). (Malú and Alejandro Escandón Collection).

the inclusion of equine animals (fig. 3). Here the fathering *lobo* of the *sambaiga* is no longer depicted in a labour context, but as a rider who is welcomed by the *india* wife. Although owning a horse and firearms was then no longer as restricted as it had been in the 16th and 17th century, the fact that the *lobo* riding ensemble is put in the central position of the painting is still rather powerful. In addition, the riding horse is quite respectably equipped and shows off a brand mark.

If we put the two casta paintings of the series in connection, it seems that the details and significance of this rider/riding horse depiction and the well-attired appearance they represent can be interpreted as an extension of the socioeconomic framework offered by the casta paintings. In the 18th century, the casta is strongly rooted in rules and logics of blood and lineage, but the strict boundaries set for casta socioeconomic opportunities seem to be getting more and more porous. Yet, to explain this shift from the rather exclusive and precarious rider-horse ensemble in the early phase of the Caribbean and Mexican conquest to a more commonly accepted characteristic of colonial Mexican life in the 18th century, a lot of research is still left to do. But let me offer two approaches.

In his 2013 article on labour in Baroque Spanish America, Kris E. Lane summarizes that by the 1550s, Indian slavery was (officially) only tolerated in border regions of the Spanish territories. Other forms of Indian labour included the so-called *encomienda* system or adapted forms of *repartimiento*, serfdom, corvée allotments or tributary work (Lane 2013, 183-184). The whole concept of labour and society was changed for both the Spanish and indigenous communities, as Caribbean and Mexican men and women were put –by different means– to work as “farmers, herders, stonemasons, miners, loggers, porters, paddlers, sailors, soldiers, guides, and even phlebotomists” in the case of men, and “cooks, laundresses, vegetable gardeners, wet nurses, and babysitters” in the case of women (Lane 2013, 183). Whereas the main labour load was stemmed by Indian workers, the American Spaniards –unlike their European relatives– no longer had to include basic craftsmanship and farming tasks within their own societal context. Lane emphasizes that these labour systems have so dominated scholarly research of colonial Spanish work forms that “they obscure the steady rise of indigenous wage work” (Lane 2013, 184). Yet, the rise of wage work correlates with the rise in muleteering. This rather silent development might prove a fruitful starting point to think about modes of interaction between humans and mules in their commonly shared world of labour.

As Kris E. Lane summarized Spanish American labour sententiously:

Baroque Spanish America's labor force was sharply graded by color, legal status, and gender, yet it was also marked by considerable flux and regional variation. Indigenous peoples did most of the work despite their drop in numbers. They were followed by Africans and their descendants, most enslaved but increasingly free. People of mixed background came third, but their proportion grew over time. Whatever their status or caste, all workers in the colonies tended to be dependent on some “Spanish” patron. To be Spanish did not always mean to be white, but it increasingly meant to be engaged solely in the work

of government, education, household management, religious devotion, or defense (Lane 2013, 184).

If we talk about labour in the Caribbean and Colonial Mexican contexts, the actual work we have in mind like mining, transportation, heavy lifting or grinding very often included a mode of interaction between labourers of human and equine kind. In addition, the significance of racial lineages and their supposed purity or impurity was constitutive for this developing hierarchical society. Bodily features and lineage were thought to be related just as animals were ranked according to their nobility in bloodline and appearance.

This brings us to the second approach. In 2004, Jean-Pierre Digard coined the phrase “la centauration du Nouveau Monde” (Digard 2004, 101, 115-120). He introduced it to describe the quasi-global diffusion of the horse and of the “genre de vie cavalier” (*estilo de vida caballero*) (Digard 2004, 101). What started in 1493 as an introduction of a few dozen specimen of a new type of animal had unexpected consequences. The horse was neither native to the Caribbean nor the American mainland, and the fertility and reproduction rates of the horses (as well as cows, sheep and goats) were commented upon in paradisiac terms by the Spaniards and –as we will see shortly– more apocalyptic terms by Mexican contemporaries.

What could not have been predicted was the rapid and, in many ways, devastating diffusion of European animals both in the Caribbean and on the Mesoamerican mainland (Trigg 2004). Dietary adaptation (e.g. cassava bread and maize) and mainly favourable climatic conditions led to two effects. First, horses, but also cows, pigs or sheep went feral and they experienced forms of de-domestication (Sluyter 1996; Trigg 2004, 234-238; Anderson 2004, 121; deFrance 2009; Tortorici 2013, 42). And secondly, not only the quantity of horses, but also the quality of the horses, especially on Cuba and in Mexico, improved radically. Soon, the Mexican horses were so famous for their natural strength and beauty that their praise found its way even into Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (Cervantes 1963, 90).

Whereas Spanish accounts documented the wondrous fertility of their animals, indigenous accounts drew on a different interpretative mode of this radical environmental, but also socio-cultural transformation. In his lucid study of how European animal herds were perceived by Nahuatl-speaking commentators, Zeb Tortorici shows that, in at least one line of interpretation, the quite literal replacement of (native) people by (non-native) animal herds was incorporated into eschatological narratives and so the year 1558 could be read as the end of the world because it was “the year the people turned into cattle” (Tortorici 2013).

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In an essay on animal labour in modern Cuban history, Reinaldo Funes Monzote highlights the surprising development that, in the post-1990 era, animal labour rose

to new heights. Because of the economic crisis following the collapse of the Eastern European socialist bloc, agriculture and transportation had to switch back to animals as workforce. Especially in the ensuing rise of the sugar cane business, oxen, horses and mules returned to plantation labour and proved an essential modern economic back-up (Funes Monzote 2013, 209-210). Despite this uncharacteristic development in Cuban history, labour and conquest as modes of interaction between human and non-human beings had a more essential and day-to-day significance in early modern Caribbean and Latin American times.

The article supports recent research claims that human and non-human modes of interaction are valid objects of investigation to learn about socio-cultural workings. In addition to hunting and husbandry, I suggested establishing labour in its own analytical categories. In the post-Columbian Caribbean and Amerindian context, these modes of interaction not just shaped everyday experiences and long-term ecological shifts, but were intricately woven into the very fabric that constituted the social world. The conquistadorial rider/riding horse configuration dominated the Spaniards self- and external perception and it was the core of the Spanish self-narrative of superiority and hierarchical dominance. The close and very often personal relationship between individual riders and their equine riding companions was at the same time seen as a socially relevant relationship, but also a constant source of conflict. In the late 15th and early 16th century, the centauric pact was a precarious bond that was partly dissolved in the following decades as horses were no longer only the conquest companion animals, but also a de-domesticated herd.

These perceptions are closely linked to the physical body as site of practices. The social, cultural, military and economic practices enabling the conquest cannot be separated from the bodily presence of animals. Just as the conquistadorial centaur (imaginatively or not) blurred the strict boundaries of human and equine beings, so did the use of mules, indigenous and African labourers as work force. A body-centred approach enables us to think beyond the animal/human dichotomy, whereas a body-historical approach can focus on historical specifics. From this perspective, the rise of the indigenous muleteering class, the development of 18th century casta society in Colonial Mexico and its societal mode dominated by discourses and practices of lineage, purity and physical appearance bespeak of a more general attitude towards human and non-human bodies. The constant oscillation between blurring and clarifying the boundaries should be seen as concrete and continuous work on social borders. The hybrid is, therefore, not only a modern concept readily applied to colonial and postcolonial contexts, but a discursive and practical early modern means of social ordering.

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Manuscript received: 07.02.2018

Revised manuscript: 02.12.2018

Manuscript accepted: 16.01.2019