

Animal Biographies – Recovering Animal Selfhood through Interdisciplinary Narration?

International Conference
9-11 March 2016, University of Kassel, Germany
Deadline: 21 August 2015

Call for Papers

In his *Drives of Animals* (1760/2), the philosopher and ethologist Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) retells a story of a Guinean monkey that is shipped off to England. “On seeing the sailors climb on the lashings and masts,” Reimarus writes, the monkey “not only climbed the individual ropes, but in swinging from one rope to the other, from one mast to the other, flung himself for thirty or even fifty feet through the air, and never missed, just as if to show that he mastered the art better.” [1] Unfortunately we do not know anything about the acrobat’s gender or his/her fate before and after this trip. But a voyage on the ocean would have marked out his/her life as rather uniquely distinctive from that of his/her peers, while there seems to be a reciprocal dynamic in motion in his/her life aboard, that points towards the animal’s somewhat reflexive engagement with his/her rather unfamiliar environment.

According to Reimarus, the monkey’s proficiency shows how deeply innate and unconscious, and hence pre-regulated the behaviour of animals is, but his retelling of the account in fact points towards a very different element of the animal: that specific monkey’s own biography and agency in directing its behaviour. His account thus makes visible tensions within attempts to reconcile our concept of the animal with its empirical, material presence, and the challenge to recover the life peculiar to animals.

In much more recent times and within the wake of the current interest in animals as subject matter of the humanities, the writing of animal biographies attempts to resolve such tensions. [2] Over recent years, various authors, often but not exclusively working from historical sources, have attempted to reconstruct the biographies of individual dogs, horses, rhinos, cows or hippopotami; examples range from the sad fate of captivated rhinoceros Clara on her tour of Europe and biographical accounts of the Alaskan and Scottish dogs Balto and Greyfriars Bobby to free-roaming animals such as South African hippopotamus Huberta. [3] The animal biography has surfaced as approach to honour and reveal the individuality or even subjectivity of animals and make them visible as self-willing entities, as well as to highlight their individual and significant effect on cultures, communities and histories.

As a rather recent and not entirely unproblematic approach to human-animal studies, we see the need for an interdisciplinary exchange between ethnographic, ethological, historical, literary, art historical and anthropological perspectives, without being limited to these. Taking up the efforts to make the material animal visible through reconstructing animal biographies as central theme for our conference, we invite papers that deal with the writing of animal biography from different disciplinary, methodical and theoretical perspectives. The conference centres on the question, if and in what way animal biographies are suited to recover the life peculiar to animals.

Questions that could be raised, for example, range from as fundamental as what ‘animal biography’ means, especially historically, to the sources that can be used to approach the writing of concrete animal biographies. What theoretical, conceptual or methodological

approaches exist and could be utilised to write animal biographies? How can they be put into practice? What challenges and problems, both methodologically as well theoretically, arise? What role plays, for example, narration or oral history, such as interviews with animal handlers, in writing animal biographies that might overcome subsuming the animal to an anthropocentric mould? In what way impacts the category of animal gender the writing of animal biographies, both materially but also conceptually? Is it at all a significant category for writing the biography of an animal? In which way could Geertz's thick description, Adorno's constellations, Benjamin's dialectical image, or Foucault's genealogy, among others, be used for the genre of animal biography? Can Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) or William Bingley's (1774-1823) *Animal Biography, or, Anecdotes of the Lives, Manners and Economics of the Animal Creation* (1803) be considered early and useful precursors?

But we also want to engage the writing of animal biography critically and ask for the limitations and problems of the genre biography for bringing the material animal into the foreground. Is the focus on a few pronounced animal personalities not just shifting the perimeter of the collective, without any potential of moving beyond the anthropocentrism in our relation to animals? What is with the mass of animals, of which the individuals do not leave distinguished marks? Do they not become even more invisible than before? In recourse to Bourdieu we might also ask if the concept of biography is at all useful for the recovering of individuality. Have individuals biographies in the first place – or, coming from the opposite direction, is the construction of a biography a necessary precondition for subjectivity? And *have* animals biographies, or is their experience momentary, and the writing of animal biographies an anthropomorphic construction? Would this extend to all species? Or are biographies indeed peculiar to human animals, and maybe a few other non-human species?

While we are based within the field of history and therefore particularly well placed for historical perspectives towards writing animal biographies, we invite scholars from various related disciplinary backgrounds and interest in the topic of animal biography as well as biography scholars with an interest in thinking their subject matter in relation to animals. Since they seem particularly promising to us, we are especially interested in approaches that explore and experiment with the relation between ethnography and ethology as well as papers that try to make the approaches of multi-species or more-than-human ethnography and geography work for the historical sciences. We are looking forward to papers engaging the topic both on a general as well as a concrete empirical level, for example through reconstructing biographies of specific animals.

The conference will be held from lunchtime 9 to lunchtime 11 March 2016 at the University of Kassel's main campus, Germany. To be considered for a presentation, please **submit abstracts of 200-300 words until 21 August 2015**. There is no fee to attend the conference. Subject to availability of funds, subsidies for travel and accommodation expenses may be available for authors of papers selected. The event is organized by Prof. Dr. Mieke Roscher and Dr. André Krebber at the chair for the History of Human-Animal Relations. Please contact us through animalbio@uni-kassel.de for submission of abstracts and further information regarding the conference.

[1] Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Thiere, hauptsächlich über ihre Kunsttriebe...*, 2 bks., Bk. 1, edited by Jürgen von Kempster (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982; reprint, [Nachdr. d. Ausg. Hamburg 1762]), p. 431., our translation from German.

[2] Erica Fudge, "Animal Lives - Erica Fudge Asks If, and How, a Biography of an Animal Might Be Written," *History Today*, 2004, 54, no. 10: 21-26; Margo DeMello, *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines* (Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Gesine Krüger, Aline Steinbrecher, and Clemens Wischermann, "Animate History. Zugänge und Konzepte einer Geschichte zwischen Tieren und Menschen," in *Tiere und Geschichte: Konturen einer "Animate History"*, ed. Gesine Krüger, Aline Steinbrecher, and Clemens Wischermann (Stuttgart: Steiner, Franz, 2015).

[3] Hilda Kean, "An Exploration of the Sculptures of Greyfriars Bobby, Edinburgh, Scotland, and the Brown Dog, Battersea, South London, England," *Society & Animals*, 2003, 11, no. 4: 353-73; Hilda Kean, "Balto, the Alaskan Dog and His Statue in New York's Central Park: Animal Representation and National Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2009, 15, no. 5: 413-30; Gesine Krüger, "Das Koloniale Tier. Natur - Kultur - Geschichte," in *Wo ist Kultur? Perspektiven der Kulturanalyse*, ed. Thomas Forrer and Angelika Linke (Zürich: Vdf Hochschulverlag AG an der ETH Zürich, 2014); Leslie Witz, "The Making of an Animal Biography: Huberta's Journey into South African Natural History, 1928-1932," *Kronos*, 2004, no. 30: 138-66.