Conclusion

Feral Empire

In the early modern world, the horse figured prominently, both physically and metaphorically, at the intersection of state and subject, as well as between ruling elites and the rest of the populace. Commissions for fine portraits, the military costs, and the social, performative value of horses attest to this fact. But what do we know about individual relations with horses in this period? The warm and slightly sweet breath of a horse after an early morning feed, the crackle of ice in the trough in the winter or the buzzing of flies in the summer, the blisters of boots or saddle sores, the apprehensive or contented flick of the ears – these and so many other experiences must have been as common as they are now. Despite the schematic importance of the horse, these myriad interactions are rarely documented and archived to an extent that lets us marvel at, recreate, or explore them in depth.

Occasional notes of the intimacy of human–equine relations slip through in the early modern genre of the instructional manual for riding and caring for horses, such as how to offer rewards that horses most appreciate as part of a training regimen. Distinct from earlier veterinary manuscripts in circulation, these emerging printed works attempted to synthesize a rich, historical body of knowledge and experience, and they also point, beyond an individual nobleman demonstrating his skill, to an economic and relational landscape comprised of a diverse range of people and horses: from stable assistants, horse trainers, and veterinarians to traders, bureaucrats, and outsiders; from warhorses and pleasure horses to village workhorses, mules, and free-ranging horses. Likewise, in the archives of the day-to-day business of the empire, explicit mention of a horse was often not accompanied by anything more than a color to describe it; yet, in pulling on the loose threads marking places where

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horses had passed through, their presence and influence, submerged just beneath the surface, begins to takes shape.

As Etienne Benson described writing about historical animals, research depends on "tracks, trails, or traces – those material-semiotic remnants of whatever it is the pursuer hopes to catch, those often unintentional indexes of a now-absent presence."[1] Those "absent-present" horses have shaped the arguments offered here about the imprint of the horse, the negotiations taking place within an equine political ecology, and the unanticipated feral responses to husbandry and breeding – all avenues for understanding equine agency in Iberian history. Perhaps tellingly, these traces are found dispersed throughout municipal level archives, at the points where interspecies relations transected a broader imperial network. The landscapes themselves changed from one colonial city to the next, and so too did the archives and the nature of the records they contained. The horse in the archive, then, is not only a matter of their representation and perception but also a matter of seeing this subject within a multispecies landscape, where a "more-than-human-sociality" sets these relations into motion.[2] The limitations of historical archives become a starting point for learning about landscapes that emerged through innumerable individual encounters. Reconstructed from their traces and tracks, the "liveliness" of these equine trajectories is compelling.

This book has explored the situated and embodied interactions of humans and horses in various localities and landscapes, beginning with human–equine relations in the Iberian Peninsula and tracing their influence in the expanding Iberian world. In the institutions used to govern frontier municipalities, owning and riding a horse was central to the distribution of land, access to political office, and to the legal language of privileges and exemptions. In a more material sense, management of horse populations represented a municipal responsibility integral to the common good that was replicated in new colonial settlements. These elements of an Iberian culture of the horse influenced conquest and colonization in the expanding empire.

Better understanding this "imprint" of the horse in governance structures also reveals its dynamic tensions. Beyond the social distinction of

[1] Etienne Benson, "Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace," in *Making Animal Meaning*, ed. Linda Kalof and Georgina M. Montgomery (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 3.

[2] Anna Tsing, "More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description," in *Anthropology and Nature*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (New York: Routledge, 2013), 34.

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nobility, colonizers utilized the horse to negotiate improved status, and these underlying norms of social mobility in Iberian horse culture also provided an opportunity for Indigenous allies to make use of these institutions, to either effectively resist or to engage with them for their own ends. Likewise, the material liveliness of horses is evident in the interactions comprising an equine political ecology in regional, colonial environments. The prohibitions and ordinances of the *mesta* suggested control over access to horses in colonial territory, yet these husbandry practices themselves fostered a growing abundance of horses, many of them feral. Ecological change, both observed and enacted, was entangled with social and political relationships, an interdependence that shaped the perception of and exercise of Spanish imperial power.

Achieving a truly global reach at the turn of the sixteenth century radically transformed the Castilian monarchy, stretching the limits of existing methods of governing while ushering in new practices. The efforts of the Catholic Monarchs to centralize power were quickly overwritten by new dynastic inheritances and imperial titles under Charles V, and subsequent new claims to territories in the Americas and Asia strained the efficacy of centralized control, whether deployed through bureaucrats or charismatic representatives of imperial authority. Describing the affairs of empire enacting "power at a distance" is complicated, and the Iberian world has been characterized as both an omniscient and oppressive bureaucracy and as a decentralized and negotiated authority.

How does the horse help us rethink the empire unfolding within a larger Iberian world? The quality and characteristics of Spanish forms of husbandry and domestication were not nearly as pervasive and controlling as might have been projected or imagined. Emerging feral horse herds provide one example where colonial structures of control imposed on equine bodies were realized in divergent ways. Colonial horse breeding regulations attempted to manage equine *castas*, but conceded the challenges in establishing desired physical traits and their seemingly inevitable decline, and these counter-intentional responses to such ambitions delineate another aspect of ferality. The fluidity of categories applied to horses in colonial archives and discussions of early modern horse breeding practices demonstrate a practical understanding of the constructed nature of horse breeds that, likewise, runs counter to racial concepts of purity deployed in the crucible of the Iberian world. Recovering the full spectrum of possible meanings and actions in human–equine relations confirms the horse's relevance to historical change and the dynamics of a "feral empire."

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