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Horse/power: human–animal mobile assemblage in the contemporary city

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on an under-studied aspect of contemporary urban life through the experience of working horses and horse cart drivers as they negotiate mobility and livelihoods on the streets on Cape Town. By adopting an ethnographic approach including embedded participant observation, the paper provides insights to the everyday mobility of urban working animals, their human counterparts and their unique ‘humanimal’ assemblage. Results trace daily routes of travel, while providing a deeper understanding of the mobility challenges of horse carts. Ethnographic data reveal how horse cart riders depend on this form of mobility as a primary source of income which the riders use to provide for their daily needs and expenses. At the same time, this study sheds light on the elements that govern the daily mobility of horse carts including motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience and friction. This study fills a critical gap in research on urban animals and mobility in African cities, with findings that lend appreciation to the daily activity and travels from home and the road and their inherent knowledge of the city.

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Introduction

This paper explores an under-studied relational geography of coexistence between working urban animals and humans through the experience of horse cart drivers and their horses as they negotiate mobility and livelihoods on the streets of Cape Town. Horse carts in Cape Town are labourers in the informal waste economy, collecting recyclable goods, rubbish, and discarded building material throughout the city. Horse carts thus exist on the periphery of South African society on account of the work they perform, the animal-powered nature of their mobilities, and the relationship of both to questions of poverty and marginality. The contemporary marginalisation of horse carts is, however, at odds with the historical importance of horses in the work of cities. As peripheral as they may seem, horse carts are nonetheless a ubiquitous element of the urban landscape, and often treated with suspect and disdain as they negotiate the city streets.

With a brief introduction to this unique human/animal assemblage, the primary contributions of our paper are three-fold. First, through an embedded ethnographic approach, we aim to provide insights into the everyday existence of horses and horse carts and their

human/non-human animal assemblage. Given the lack of scholarship on the horse cart communities in South Africa, our aim is to understand how horse carts negotiate the city. While they are an omnipresent element of the urban landscape in our region, the experience and role of horse carts in the city is an under-explored aspect of contemporary African cities. Second, we apply Cresswell's (2010) 'politics of mobility' to understand the ways in which the coexistence of the horse and their human counterparts in public space is mediated by power. These elements, following Cresswell, include motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience and friction. A variety of regimes of existence thus act to shape the relationship between humans, animals and the city through the experience of horse carts. These include but are not limited to institutions, individuals, and laws, rules and attitudes that guide them. Finally, our study intends to contribute to filling a critical gap in research on urban working animals in South African cities, with findings that lend appreciation to the daily activities of working animals and their human counterparts. Taken together, the contributions of this paper harness the unique human/animal assemblage in order to understand relational geographies of the horse cart driver, the cart, and especially the horses who power them, within the city they inhabit. The remainder of this paper is divided into the following sections: A review of literature that helps us to frame the relational geographies of horse carts; a brief presentation of our methods and study area; discussion of our findings; and finally, our conclusions on the question of urban working animals and their relationships with the city and the humans that accompany them.

Mobility, humanimals and their relational geographies

We frame our study of horse carts in the literatures of the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) which interrogates the movements and circulations of humans, non-human animals, capital, objects and information within the social world. We pay particular attention to non-human animal mobilities, and their often under-appreciated role in the social life and work of cities. In recognition of the relationships that emerge from this, we adopt Jacob Bull's (2011) terminology of the 'humanimal' which takes account of the artificiality of the nature/culture divide when referring to 'animals' as the binary opposite of 'humans'. At the same time, we recognise the function that horses and their drivers have in the informal waste economy of South Africa, and thus review literatures that help us to understand the peripheral nature of horse carts in the context of urban inequality, and the livelihoods that are drawn out of this unique humanimal assemblage.

Mobility

Mobility, broadly referring to the movement and circulation of humans, non-human animals, capital, objects and information, is an important but contested practice for individuals and society. Both its presence and its contestation are most evident in roadways, pavements and other public spaces – all which are constantly being produced, negotiated and contested by mobile actors exerting their right to exist in the city (Jensen, 2009; Rink & Gamedze, 2016). Urban travel, as Jensen (2009) argues, is not simply about getting from A to B, but about 'producing and re-producing the city' (p. 152). Consequently, mobilities play an important role in the everyday – for humans as well as that of a multitude of non-human animals, objects, capital and information. Cresswell (2010) views mobility as

an essential resource which is differentially accessed by various spheres of society. The mobile lives that we enact, like many aspects of the social world, are relational, involve power, and thus are unequal. Urry (2000) highlights the relational aspects of mobilities, noting that they require a dialectic between mobility and immobility – in other words, stillness or fixity. Such relationships take places within constellations of inter-related mobilities and mobility systems (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). As a result of the co-production of mobilities, theorists within this paradigm have embraced the role of assemblage in managing (Salter, 2013; Sheller, 2007) and experiencing (Jensen & Vannini, 2016) mobility and circulation.

This recognition of power and the problematising of sovereignty in movement is theorised by Cresswell (2010) who identifies six elements – what he calls the ‘politics’ – that govern mobility. The politics to which Cresswell refers constitute the ‘social relations that involve the production and distribution of power’ (Cresswell, 2010, p. 162). These politics include: Motive force, which is the reason for the movement of a person or a thing; Velocity, referring to the speed at which a person or an object moves; Rhythm, which draws attention to patterns and temporalities of movement; Route, focusing on the channelling of movement; Experience, which describes how mobility feels; And lastly, friction which indicates how movement is variably slowed. Cresswell’s theorisation of the politics of mobility illustrates that nothing moves equally (equally fast, equally comfortably, or with equal motives). These politics do not only apply to humans, but also to the non-human animal world.

Non-human animal mobility and the working horse

While mobilities scholars have focused on a panoply of mobile subjects, the intersection of human- and non-human animal mobility has been relegated to ‘roadkill’ (Swart, 2015). As a consequence, Swart (2015) argues much of the conceptual work on mobilities to-date has been barren of animation other than humans and their machines. The omnipresence of motorised mobility in contemporary cities conceals evidence of the city’s reliance on animal mobilities of the past, including horse-drawn cabs (Curling, 1851), carts (Sweeney, 2014), carriages (Almeida, 2014; Geels, 2005), omnibuses (Curling, 1851) and trams (Swart, 2013, 2015). Such urban animal histories are tied to the class and status of those who labour with them (Sweeney, 2014), but tend to favour the human element of their assemblage rather than the working horse.

Horses have long been used as a ‘working tool’ essential to the development of the city. They have served as an essential source of mobility in transporting food, other goods, and materials into the city, while moving waste and manufactured goods out of the city (Almeida, 2014). Elgåker (2011) argues that the relationships between humans and animals – horses in particular – has been a critical element for the evolution of the cities across the globe. As cities across the USA began to grow in the nineteenth century, so too did the demand for horses as a source of intracity mobility (Tarr, 1999; Tarr & McShane, 2008). In the burgeoning cities of the USA and elsewhere, the work of transporting people as well as intracity freight was powered by horses. Eventually, however, the need for greater time efficiency and reliability pushed forward the demand for motorised transport (Anas, Arnott, & Small, 1998, p. 1428). For many city dwellers, this signalled a transition from reliance on the horse as a source of labour, to one for recreation and sport (Elgåker, 2011).

As sources of mechanical power began to take over, the need for the working horse dwindled (McShane & Tarr, 2003), and by the 1930s there was little evidence of working horses in most large urban centres (Nakicenovic, 1986). In one example, between 1910 and 1920 vehicle registrations in Chicago, USA alone increased from 800 to 23,000 while horse-drawn vehicle registrations were halved (Anas et al., 1998, p. 1429). In spite of this, horses and other urban animals remained present in poorer, marginalised urban settings. To date, equine power offers an important source of mobility in such communities where horses still exist alongside humans. In their report on working animals, the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), notes that

In less economically developed countries, working animals play a fundamental role in numerous sectors, particularly agriculture and the transport of goods and people ... [providing] both direct and indirect incomes to households. (FAO, 2011, p. viii)

In spite of the important contribution that working animals have made in the past and present, competition between mechanisation and animals was evident in our South African context in the early twentieth century (Swart, 2010). Swart goes on to mention that the growth of mechanised mobility began with railway construction 1863, accelerated by diamond and gold discoveries. Following this, the first automobile – referred to as the ‘horseless carriage’ – was transported to Johannesburg in January 1897, ironically by means of a horse and cart (Swart, 2010). Mechanisation led to the eventual decline of the working urban horse (McShane & Tarr, 2011), yet their role in transport and ‘draught power’ has endured throughout sub-Saharan Africa as elsewhere in the global South. It is not only the case that the working horse is a relic of an earlier age, they are also part of a marginalised sector of the economy.

The informal waste economy

According to da Silva (2005), high rates of unemployment and ever-increasing amounts of solid waste, combined with a growing demand for recycled materials, has formulated the perfect conditions for the work of gathering and re-selling unwanted goods. This work is known as the informal waste economy, comprising

individuals or enterprises who are involved in private sector recycling and waste management activities which are not sponsored, financed, recognised, supported, organised or acknowledged by the formal solid waste authorities. (Scheinberg, Simpson, & Gupta, 2010)

The sight of the urban waste picker has become the norm in cities and peri-urban areas in South Africa, yet as Samson (2010) and Schenck and Blaauw (2011) contend, little is known about them. With few exceptions (Timm, 2015), meagre attention has been paid to them. Workers in the informal waste economy are often labelled with disparaging monikers such as ‘scavengers’. These individuals, according to Medina (1997), are often characterised by their poverty and low social status, thus informal work in the waste sector is seen as an adaptive response to chronic poverty. Timm (2015) describes a range of individuals and groups in Cape Town’s informal waste economy including ‘skarelaars’ (street waste pickers), ‘carties’ (horse cart waste collectors), and the ‘bakkie brigade’ (pick-up truck waste operators), that together constitute the principal actors within the urban informal waste economy.

Given the characteristic state of poverty, members of this economic sector may lack access to the basic means of mobility. It is for this reason that working animals provide income potential to pickers and their households. Owning and working with a horse and cart allows such individuals to enter the informal waste sector, build working relationships, and derive income to provide for their basic needs and requirements. Despite these general characteristics, not all members of the informal waste economy are poor. As Rogerson (2001), Bubel (1990) and Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) reveal, the activities of waste collection are comprised of a hierarchy of players. These include street-level waste pickers with their modified trollies at the bottom of the chain; itinerant waste pickers such as 'carties'; second-hand dealers who may have their own teams of collection crews; as well as formal-sector recycling industries at the top of the economic and social system. Horse carts are only one element of the informal waste economy, but dominate in the area of Cape Town known as the Cape Flats for their ability to transport of scrap metals or other waste materials (Langenhoven & Dyssel, 2007). Characterised by poverty, hierarchies and relationships to the animal world that are unlike the greater urban setting, horse carts and their humanimal assemblage are a complex actor in the informal waste economy. As Swanton (2014) concludes in his rumination on waste and mobility,

Movements of waste are entangled in all kinds of social relations, material orderings, power relations, material transformations and injustices. (Swanton, 2014, p. 296)

The role and mediation of mobility by humanimals in the informal waste economy thus provides an important exemplar of relational geographies between working animals, humans, and the labour they perform together. Relational geographies exemplify webs of relations constituted by '... assemblages of people, artefacts, other forms of materiality' (Ettema & Schwanen, 2012, p. 175) – to which we insert the urban horse as a critical component.

Methods and study area

Our ethnographic methods enable us to attend to the complex relationships of the equine-human assemblage. As Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson (2018) remind us, research orientations such as ours are '... alert to, able to grasp, and capable of representing processes and things in flux, in complex relations and activity, and which are composed and recomposed' (p. 780). Ethnographic data were collected through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews with key actors in the horse cart community, identified through the Cart Horse Protection Association (CHPA); and embedded participant observation where one of the authors spent one month riding on a horse cart with its horse and driver. While the embedded experience with one horse and driver was crucial for gaining insights to the horse cart community, we acknowledge that our single sample is not representative of all horse carts. Data collection took place primarily in Cape Town's 'Cape Flats', a low-to-middle income area that is gripped by the effects of poverty and the legacies of apartheid, evidenced through high rates of unemployment, gangsterism and teenage pregnancy. Born out of apartheid's racial segregation, the spatial and demographic composition of the Cape Flats is characterised by mixed-use residential and industrial areas where government housing, informal settlements, small-holder farms, and low-value flats are situated near large industrial factories providing

work for residents. The Cape Flats provide an appropriate site for this study as a majority of the carthorse community resides in the area, keeping their horses in domestically situated stables or on small farms within the area. It is thus a setting where humanimal relationships take place both in domestic and public spheres.

Humanimal relationships: an urban cowboy and his sidekick

Imi, the urban cowboy

Imran 'Imi' Dortley is a carthorse driver from the Cape Flats. He started driving when he dropped out of school and has been driving since 2010. As he explains,

Ek het 'n bietjie junk aangevang bydi skool sien jy nou, Justin. Toe los ek maar die skool. Toe gaan ek na my bra'tjie, die perdemense, daar is ook perdemense daar in ons plek. Ek het elke dag daarnatoe gegaan en toe begin ek ook maar om saam met hulle te ry en toe sien ek dis 'n living vir my, 'n inkomste. Ek het eers perde by hulle gehire om te begin werk ...

[I didn't do well in school and got into some serious trouble. I decided to leave school. There are people in my community who have been involved in the carthorse industry for a while and I decided to join them. I started to drive along and work with them every day and realised that it could be a living for me as well as it provided me with an income. In the beginning, I hired a horse and cart from them to start working on my own.]

The motive force (Cresswell, 2010) for Imi's humanimal mobility is the need to produce income for his family consisting of his grandmother, sister, cousin and himself. Imi and fellow members of the horse cart community are compelled to negotiate their own rhythmic mobilities and those of the city with the assistance of draught animal power to make ends meet. Their physical mobility, that of the goods they carry, and the capital that they attempt to circulate are therefore dependent on their horses and their carts. Today Imi has a cart and three horses of his own: Farieda, Tony and Byron. The human names given to the horses epitomises Imi's relationship with his working horses. His horses are more than just draught animal power; they are part of his family, fellow animals with whom he has special relationships. Each morning before hitting the road, he wipes Farieda down, brushes her hair, feeds her, and ensures that everything is in order before going out for the day. When asked about Farieda, Imi's responses are filled with emotion. His eyes light up and he often blushes when he speaks of her: 'Want sy is te mooi! Jy kry mos mense wat junk kyk na hulle perde en hulle perde is maer!' [Because, she is too beautiful! You get people who do not look after their horse very well and their horses are skinny.] As he drives through the area surrounding CHPA, he greets people in the street and they shout and greet him in return. One of those that he greets warmly is Zelda, an animal welfare assistant (AWA) at the CHPA. Zelda plays a matriarchal role for many in the carthorse community, making use of a nurturing approach to get through to a community of individuals who, on the outside, may seem coarse and unforgiving. She is compassionate by nature, issuing kind words rather than commands within the carthorse community. Caring for both the animal and human elements of the carthorse community are important to her. Ensuring that the horses are healthy is the most fulfilling part of her job. As the horses' health is also critical for their drivers, Zelda's equine guardianship results in care for both humans and their animal counterparts.

The CHPA plays an important part in the daily lives of the carthorse community who, as Zelda notes, would otherwise not be able to afford private veterinary care. Through the CHPA, Zelda eases the 'politics' of friction on horses and their drivers. Just as motorists service their vehicles, so too do cart drivers service their horses regularly. The CHPA offers subsidised shoes, veterinary care and feed for the horse cart community. They also require the registration of the carts (including a personalised 'number plate' with the name of the horse on it) and set out rules for the care and condition of the horses. These include rules on operation during various weather conditions, governing the politics of rhythm in terms of when horses are in-use, and route in terms of where they operate. Zelda notes that the living conditions of the horses have improved in recent years, to the point that the CHPA receives compliments in addition to complaints from the public. Imi and his fellow drivers also make use of the CHPA as a space for social gathering where they chat and joke with other friends and members of the community.

Farieda, draught power and trusted sidekick

As loved as she is by Imi, working animals like Farieda are judged in a caste system that predates the arrival of urban horses. Going back to the nineteenth century, as Sweeney (2014) contends, the status of horses varied greatly,

... from the desirable racehorse and the carriage horses of the elite and the powerful draft horses of large companies and stores down to the workhorses of the city that pulled cars, wagons, and carts and powered machinery ... Purity of race was a growing concern and there was a general distrust of any kind of hybrid, whether animal or human. (Sweeney, 2014, p. 133)

Today, similar judgements are meted out to Farieda and Imi from passing motorists through the hurling of insults as well as rubbish. The presence of a working animal in the contemporary city seems to them out-of-place and time, even cruel. As Imi recalls,

Jy kry mense wat vir jou judge en jy kry mense wat so nou en dan vir jou wil rob en seermaak en trokke wat junk ry wat miskien vir jou vani pad af wil ry ... Jy kry sekere wit mense wat met jou wil argue en dan sê hulle vir jou jy moet huis toe gaan, want hy wil rus en ons maak geraas in sy area. Hulle sal soema die law ook bel en sê ons is up to no good.

[You get people who judge you and you get people who want to rob and hurt you and well as trucks that might want to you drive you from the side of the road ... You get certain white people that will argue with you and tell you that you must leave the area and go home because you are making a noise and they want to rest. They will also call the law enforcement and tell them that we are up to no good.]

Cresswell's (2010) politic of 'experience' is thus articulated in how others judge their presence on the roadways. Regardless of how they are judged, the humanimal hybrid is key to the survival of both Farieda and Imi. They are reliant on each other: Farieda for the care she receives from Imi and Zelda; and Imi on the draught animal power he derives from Farieda as they move throughout the city in search of opportunities. The politics of their 'route' is articulated by economic opportunities. The services they offer include rubble removal (in the form of constructional or garden waste); and collection of second-hand and unwanted goods and scrap metal which they re-sell, repurpose or use for themselves. The working urban horse also play an important role within their communities, providing a transport

service running errands such as fetching groceries or parcels. In the course of a typical day, Imi and Farieda traverse Voortrekker Road, through Salt River and Maitland, and further afield to Nyanga and Philippi, calling on tyre outlets. Here they provide a service to owners of the tyre outlets who allow them to take tyres from the store free of charge or at a small fee. Tyres are often repurposed by cutting them into flower pots which are then sold in other markets.

As they ply the streets of the city, the challenges of navigating in the urban environment become clear. Something as simple as a stop sign becomes a challenge for horse and driver in the hard, unnatural surfaces of the city. A stop needs to be closely calculated before coming to a complete halt. Stop signs also create a serious problem in the sense that not all motorists acknowledge the legitimacy of horses on the streets of the city. Motorists often blatantly ignore the horse and cart rider as if they are not present. The CHPA provides awareness campaigns to motorists, likening animal-powered vehicles to ships where

... the more manoeuvrable ship has to give way to the less manoeuvrable one, animal-drawn vehicles have less manoeuvrability than motor cars; especially when they have a load on the back, they cannot stop as fast as your car can, and they cannot make quick turns. (<http://carthorse.org.za/>)

Speed bumps, bridges and steep inclines require the humanimal assemblage to work closely together to keep each other safe without losing their precious cargo. When approaching a bridge, for example, Imi instructs Farieda to increase speed with a firm 'hut-hut'. Reaction to Imi's call is immediate but has been learnt over time. According to Miele (2009) Victorians were aware that horses did not understand human language, yet such animals were able to determine what was required of them by the signals in human language as well as a harsh whip. But for Imi, his relationship to Farieda exceeds such cruelties. In Farieda's case,

Sy was gebore daar by my. Ek het ook haar ma gehad maar toe gee ek Farieda se ma vir Aunty Zelda en toe hou ek vir Farieda agter. Sy understand vir my omdat ek elke dag met haar praat, ek gee vir haar tjips en as sy op die veld is dan fluit ek vir haar dan kom sy en ek gee vir haar kos.

[She was born here at my house. I then gave Farieda's mother to Aunt Zelda and I kept Farieda. Farieda understands me because I speak to her every day. When she is on the field, I would then whistle and she will come back to me. I also give her chips and food.]

Before descending from a bridge, Imi stops Farieda completely, to break the momentum that was built up in the ascent. Imi then jumps off the cart, speaking to Farieda gently while walking next to her. This act of care calms her immediately, and serves as a reminder that human language has the ability to communicate feelings to the horse as well as foster or break down relationships between the horse and driver (Miele, 2009). At the same time, this act is a complex negotiation of the politics of 'velocity' and 'friction' – balancing the speed of Farieda's draught animal power and the delicate friction between horseshoes and tarmac.

Humanimals in the city: mediation and power

While the presence of working animals in the city may seem out-of-place to many, they exist because of the uneven mobility landscape and speak to the ways that individuals

use resources available to them to earn a living. The relational geographies that emerge from Imi and Farieda's experiences exemplify the contested nature of working animals in the city, and the ways that their mobility is mediated through power. The power and politics of mobility is evidenced in Imi's motive force; the need to produce income for his family. This is what compelled him to 'move', with the assistance of draught animal power. Likewise, the velocity, or speed at which Imi and Farieda as a humanimal assemblage are able to move through the city is mediated by power. We can see evidence of mobility hierarchies in the ways that horse carts are viewed by the general public on the city streets. The everyday rhythms of carthorses vary according to the temporalities of the day of the week, the season, and the weather. They follow the rhythm of waste collection around the city. In winter they are hampered by rain, in summer by searing heat. During the 'festive season' at year's end, people discard old items creating opportunities for collecting and redistributing these goods. On weekdays businesses are active and thus services are needed. On weekends, focus shifts elsewhere, often to domestic duties. And the routes of Imi and his fellow waste collectors are channelled by opportunity. His route is often guided by the temporalities of waste collection as noted above. Imi and Farieda circulate through areas of the city based on their prescribed waste collection day before the City's solid waste department empties the bins, eliminating the opportunity of their benefitting from the waste. The experience – or how the movement feels – for Imi and Farieda is mediated by the attitudes of others, by the materiality of the cart, the quality of Farieda's shoes, and the state of the cart's tyres. It is certainly the case that the frictions which Imi and Farieda experience are not simply related to the slowing of their physical movement, or the delicate balance of friction between the hard and unnatural surfaces of the city that come in contact with steel horse shoes, but also the frictions that abrade their lives in how they are impacted by poverty, discrimination and harsh judgement on the part of the general public who see their human/animal relationship as out-of-place and out-of-time. The temporality of weather applies friction to Imi and Farieda as well. Although the CHPA advises that horse and carts not be on the streets while raining due to safety and visibility concerns, there are times when hunger necessitates it.

Conclusion

In parallel with Swanton's (2014) demonstration of how wastes get caught up in, and reproduce, material orderings of the world, the humanimal assemblage of horse and cart is entangled within and reproduced through the power inequities and uneven mobilities of the social world. Our study has demonstrated how horse carts exist on the periphery of South African society on account of the animal-powered mobilities that they enact, the work they perform, and the relationship of both to poverty and marginality. The horse and their human counterparts practice a tenacious use of existing resources that, as Gabriellsson (2018) asserts, is '... resourcefulness that comes out of crude necessity' (p. 95). Although the contemporary marginalisation of horse carts as evidenced in our work is at odds with the historical importance of animals in the work of cities, it nonetheless speaks to the uneven relational geographies that emerge in cities where humans and animals coexist and work alongside each other outside of the realm of recreation and sport. In the contemporary city, working horses are thus placed in age-old hierarchies of social order, and judged accordingly across and within animal species (Hovorka, 2019).

Through the application of Cresswell's (2010) 'politics' we have demonstrated a variety of regimes of existence that act through mediation of humanimal mobility to shape the relationship between working animals and humans. In spite of these mediations, the bond between Imi and Farieda is a close one, built on understanding, trust and respect, reflected in his statement that provides a fitting close,

Die is my Ferrari en dit is ook 'n convertible!

[This is my Ferrari, and it's also a convertible!]

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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