Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace

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Those of us who attempt to write about nonhuman animals are all implicated by the pun that appears in the title and throughout the text of Jacques Derrida’s *L'Animal que donc je suis.* I follow or track (*suis*, from the infinitive *suivre*) the animals about whom or about which I write, and I also am (*suis*, from *être*) an animal—specifically, a writing animal. This doubleness of animal writing—its way of situating us simultaneously as subject and object, autobiographer and biographer, pursued and pursuer—is evocatively captured in the opening line of Philip Armstrong’s study, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity,* as is the powerful and pervasive assumption that writing is a uniquely human activity: “An animal sits at a desk, writing.” To which we could add, “writing about animals,” which is always a pursuit both of the other and of ourselves: the animal that I follow, the animal that I am.
Animal Writes

Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace

ETIENNE BENSON

Those of us who attempt to write about nonhuman animals are all implicated by the pun that appears in the title and throughout the text of Jacques Derrida’s *L’Animal que donc je suis*. I follow or track (suis, from the infinitive suivre) the animals about whom or about which I write, and I also am (suis, from être) an animal—specifically, a writing animal. This doubleness of animal writing—its way of situating us simultaneously as subject and object, autobiographer and biographer, pursued and pursuer—is evocatively captured in the opening line of Philip Armstrong’s study, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*, as is the powerful and pervasive assumption that writing is a uniquely human activity: “An animal sits at a desk, writing.” To which we could add, “writing about animals,” which is always a pursuit both of the other and of ourselves: the animal that I follow, the animal that I am.

Like any pursuit, writing about animals 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. In this essay, I consider the relationship that is established in the course of writing, where “writing” is understood as a form of tracking and leaving tracks that is less specific to the human species than is usually assumed. I am especially concerned with the difficult case of historical writing, in which the “real” animal in whose gaze or body the author and art critic John Berger and many others have hoped to root an authentic, genuine, or ethical relationship has long since vanished. In the absence of the living animal body—in the presence of the dead, one might say—the animal historian must instead forge a (real, genuine, authentic, ethical) relationship with the embodied traces of past animal life. Doing so, I argue, requires jettisoning some of the assumptions about historiographic practice and disciplinary identity that have heretofore largely defined the scholarly field of animal studies and the narrower subdiscipline of historical writing about animals.

One of those assumptions concerns the nature of the sources from which the historian reconstructs past animal lives, whether human or otherwise. To the extent that historical sources are understood in conventional terms, that is, as textual or linguistic documents or records, the dilemma is clear. Such sources can provide rich descriptions and important insights into historical changes in human attitudes toward and relationships with animals, as the growing literature of animal history amply demonstrates. But they suffer a profound limitation from the perspective of the historian who wants to tell a multivocal, multiperspectival story.
in which the voices and perspectives are not exclusively human. Textual sources seem always to arise from the experience or activity of one particular kind of animal—the writing animal, the human. This is true even when, and perhaps particularly when, they claim to speak in the voice or see from the perspective of nonhuman animals. We might, as conservationist Carl Safina expresses it in his book *Eye of the Albatross*, want to use all of our human skills and resources “to draw out what the animals cannot tell us,” to “give words to the wordless, and voice to the voiceless.” But in doing so we are always at risk, as Donna Haraway reminds us, of ventriloquism—of speaking for rather than allowing to speak, of talking before we listen.

Erica Fudge has argued that because human historians only have access to animal lives through human documents, a “history of animals . . . is impossible,” strictly speaking. To the extent we continue to use the phrase, it must be *sous rature*—crossed out but still legible—in recognition of the fact that such a practice is impossible even as the desire for it shapes what we do. Instead, we must be satisfied, she suggests, with a history of “human attitudes toward animals,” one that is, at its best, sensitive to the way “the human” and “the animal” have been co-constructed in theory and related in practice—that is, a “holistic” history combining attention to both discursive and real animals. My approach to historical sources and the possibility of animal history is somewhat different. The apparent impossibility of animal history is, I believe, precisely a result of adopting a strict, hierarchical division between the real and the discursive, things and representations, animals and attitudes toward animals. It becomes less compelling when those divisions are suspended.

As Haraway writes in *Primate Visions*, by way of explanation of her use of the term “material-semiotic,” nonhuman animals “act and signify, and like all action and signification, theirs yield no unique, univocal, unconstructed ‘facts’ waiting to be collected. . . . Like words, machines, equations, institutions, generic writing conventions, people, and landscapes, the animals have specific kinds of solidity in the apparatus of bodily production.” I take this to have a twofold meaning: first, that animals have a “solidity” or presence in written documents, scientific or otherwise, that goes beyond mere “representation”; second, that humans are not the only creatures who leave meaningful marks or traces on the body of the world (which has in turn marked them). A certain recent turn in scholarly understanding of human-animal relationships and the human-animal distinction makes it clear that to see even the most human of texts as nothing but human—as entirely devoid of particular animals, “the animal” in general, or animality—is to succumb to one of the most powerful modern humanist illusions. If we have never been modern, as Bruno Latour suggests, neither have we (or the traces we leave behind) been human, if “human” is meant to indicate a class of beings separated from all other living beings by an unbridgeable ontological or ethical abyss. Everything we do, including writing, is shaped by our long evolutionary history of interactions with other animals and our present lived interdependence with them.

That this is true has been perhaps most persuasively argued in studies of hunting and domestication. In books such as *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* and *The Others*, primitivist Paul Shepard argues that humanity discovered itself through embodied relations with wild animals, particularly those relations established through hunting. Studies of modern-day indigenous hunters, such as Hugh Brody’s studies of hunters in the Arctic, Tom Ingold’s studies of Saami reindeer herders, Louis Liebenburg’s study of South African hunters, or Rane Willerslev’s study of the Yukaghir hunters of Siberia, have shown that the most successful hunters are adept at imagining themselves into the minds and bodies of the animals they seek to kill in order to understand, predict, and manipulate their behavior.
obligatory act of imagination, Willerslev argues, puts the hunter in the “paradoxical position of mutual mimicry,” a position whose effects extend well beyond the practice of hunting to shape the hunters’ social relations of all kinds (that is, its relations with humans as well as with nonhuman animals).14

Even scholars who do not privilege hunting or share Shepard’s belief that the disappearance of bloody worship from the lives of most modern humans has made us inhuman—a belief that differs from Berger’s particular form of Marxist humanism mainly in its location of the prelapsarian among hunter-gatherers rather than among precapitalist peasants—have agreed with the basic premise that animals and animality are constitutive of the human. Take studies of domestication, which were once founded on the assumption that domestication was an example—perhaps the example par excellence—of human domination over nonhuman animals.15 That view has increasingly given way to the perspective popularized by Stephen Budiansky in his books The Covenant of the Wild and The Truth about Dogs, in which the central question is not how humans reshaped animals for their own purposes but “why animals chose domestication.”16 In so choosing, the argument goes, nonhuman animals—the wolves who may have scavenged at the edge of human settlements or partnered with human hunters; the wildfowl who submitted themselves to the eventual ax in exchange for food, shelter, and a dramatic expansion of reproductive possibilities; and so forth—reshaped themselves for their own goals, while also profoundly reshaping human societies and cultures. That coevolutionary process continues today. Human society is not merely built on the backs of nonhuman animals; it is also built for and by animals.17

This line of thought can be taken to absurd extremes. The intellectual and ethical contortions required to see the industrial production of low-cost chicken products as a mechanism of avian flourishing are not worth the effort, not only and not least because they require a conflation of the welfare of the individual and collective (or, more precisely, an erasure of the individual in favor of the collective) and a reduction of flourishing to mere numerical abundance and biogeographical distribution.18 We should hesitate to wish such a form of flourishing even on our enemies. But a more modest version of the thesis does obtain. As a result, to a limited but important extent, writing about human history is always-already writing about animals, regardless of whether the writer has any interest in or knowledge of dogs and chickens. Humans are a kind of animal that (like all kinds of animals) has been and continues to be profoundly reshaped by its interactions with other kinds of animals.19 Even writing and reading, those seemingly quintessential human activities, can be seen as having roots in animal signs, hunting, and tracking, as J. Edward Chamberlin has argued.20 All history is animal history, in a sense—that is, history written by, for, and about animals. The only question is which.

But of course there remains a difference between historical scholarship whose explicit focus is limited to the human animal, even if that includes the impact of other animal life on humans and recognizing the animality of (human) writing as an embodied practice, and historical scholarship that aims in some way to explore the history of nonhuman animals as subjects in their own right and for their own sakes. For this latter kind of history, human-authored texts can still provide valuable insights into the past that are not reducible to the human perspective. The same operation of intellectual judo that has made it possible to see domestication more as a partnership, however unequal, than as a simple case of domination or objectification can also make human-authored texts about animals seem more like the result of a collaboration or coauthorship—a collection of traces of the animal who writes through the human as well as of the human who writes about the animal.
That such traces cannot be reduced to their human authors is perhaps most evident when one moves away from strictly linguistic textual records toward other sorts of “animal traces,” such as the early wildlife photographs whose history Matthew Brower has recounted, in which animals are present in ways that clearly exceed the intentionality of their human authors.\(^{21}\) It would be mistaken, however, to see only such pictorial, photographic, cinematic, or sculptural (for example, taxidermic) productions, which have an iconic as well as indexical relationship to the animals they depict, as being coproduced by their subjects. Because writing in any existential mode is a practice embedded in a real world of which nonhuman animals are an integral part, even avowedly fictional texts may contain traces of nonhuman animals. Pamela Banting has suggested that certain practices of attentive writing—she focuses on several late-twentieth-century Canadian writers who write about nature and wild animal life—are particularly amenable to revealing the trace of the animal.\(^{22}\) Attentive reading may also bring to light the traces of nonhuman animals even where their (human) authors did not intend to make them visible. John Simons, in his *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation*, suggests that “my apprehension and analysis of what is going on in a cultural text and specifically a piece of literature should be quite different if I read it not for the signs and traces of human struggle but rather for the tracks of the animals with which we share the planet.”\(^{23}\) Human writing in a world where human life is so intricately intertwined with nonhuman life will inevitably reveal the traces of the other.

In practice, however, even if it is both possible and critically important to look for the traces of the animal, animals, or animality in even the most human of texts, the challenges for animal history can seem of a different order than those for the history of humans who have not left textual records. One may use techniques to look for the traces of nonhuman animals in human archives that are superficially similar to those one uses to look for the traces of subaltern, poor, or disenfranchised humans in the archives of the powerful, but there seems to be a deeper divide.\(^{24}\) As Fudge has noted, the project of animal history raises questions about the necessity of intentionality and temporal consciousness (or, as she puts it, a “concept of historical periodization”) for history.\(^{25}\) Even when sources about past animal life are abundant, animal history faces an ontological challenge that can be expressed as a variant of Wittgenstein’s much-cited hypothesis that if a lion could speak we would not understand him; namely, that if lions could leave historical records they would not reveal a history that we understand as such—that is, a progressive, linear history in which the essence of what it is to be a lion depends on where and when a particular lion finds himself or herself.\(^{26}\)

The kind of agency required for such a progressive history—which remains history proper, despite efforts to produce “nonlinear” or deconstructionist histories\(^{27}\)—seems to require something more than offered by relational theories of agency such as actor-network theory, in which the agency of any particular entity arises from its network of relations to other entities. When Timothy Mitchell asks whether the mosquito can speak, he means to ask whether nonhuman entities can exceed and confound human intentions, the answer to which must surely be affirmative. But that mosquitoes themselves might have a history worth telling remains beyond the pale.\(^{28}\) This widely shared if rarely explicitly stated hypothesis rests on two assumptions. The first is a theoretical claim about the minimal properties required of an entity before it can be considered a legitimate historical subject or actor, which usually center on intentionality, language, and consciousness of the past and future, including the consciousness of death. (These properties may be assumed to be held in general or by the collective, rather than by the individual.) The second assumption is a factual one, sometimes supported by
casual reference to the scientific literature—namely, that these are properties held by humans but not by other animals.29

My argument here rests on two interrelated counterassumptions. First, whether animals are properly historical subjects or actors is an open, empirical question, not one that can be answered from the armchair. The answer may vary—is highly likely to vary, I would argue—according to the particular historical situation and kind of animal in question. To assert that animals have no history, properly speaking, is to assert a transhistorical truth, an operation perhaps appropriate for metaphysicians but not for historians committed to a rigorous historicism. It does not matter whether we see the historylessness of animals as a gift, as Friedrich Nietzsche and Rainer Maria Rilke did; as a lack, as Martin Heidegger did; or as a messianic promise, as Giorgio Agamben does. In all of these cases we would be assuming in advance what should be the result of our research.30 Second, the answer to this question and the methods that are necessary to answer it are within the professional domain of the historian. Though historians might need to draw on natural science and other fields outside the traditional purview of history—and in fact I argue below that they must—scientists no more than philosophers can tell them whether it is possible to tell the history of a particular subject. It is for historians to decide what is properly historical.

In doing so we would be better served by broadening our conception of what counts as a legitimate “primary source” and working out the practical consequences of such a broadening than we would be by quasi-philosophical disputation over the nature of animal agency, voice, or perspective, no matter whether such disputation is conducted on the grounds of actor-network theory, poststructuralist feminism, or other theoretical frameworks. Sufficient disputation has taken place to make it clear that we should at least entertain the possibility that nonhuman animals may be approached as legitimate historical actors.

Although several historical studies in recent years have already begun testing the boundaries of this possibility, these studies remain limited in the range of sources that they use and in their deployment and historicization of natural-scientific data and insights into animal behavior.31 Though it is a fair beginning, I do not think we should be satisfied by the use of today’s scientific understanding of wolf behavior, for example, as a transhistorical constant that can be projected back onto the historical and ecological conditions of two centuries ago, much as an anthropologist might project social structures and processes identified in present-day hunter-gatherer societies back onto the earliest human societies.32 Whether such an operation is valid—that is, whether a particular kind of nonhuman animal (or a certain group of “primitive” or “noncivilized” humans) is a properly historical subject whose essence is contingent on the time and place of its being—is exactly what we should hope to find out in the course of our research. In other words, having admitted the theoretical possibility of nonhuman animal historical agency, we should pose the actual existence of such agency as an empirical question rather than a philosophical or ontological presupposition.

Where possible, that research should, as I have suggested above, go beyond the important work of reading the traces that nonhuman animals have left in human texts. In The Spell of the Sensuous, David Abram argues for an expanded understanding of signification in which the traces of nonhuman activity with which the world is marked are seen as different perhaps in degree and form but not in kind from the linguistic traces of literate humans. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied perception, Abram argues that “linguistic meaning is primarily expressive, gestural, and poetic, and that conventional denotative meanings are inherently secondary and derivative.” If one accepts that premise, one must renounce,
Abram argues, “the claim that ‘language’ is an exclusively human property. If language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant, then it can never be definitively separated from the evident expressiveness of bird-song, or the evocative howl of a wolf late at night. . . . Language as a bodily phenomenon accretes to all expressive bodies, not just to the human.”33 Although Abram is not primarily concerned with temporality or historicity, his account can easily be extended in that direction. Expressive bodies often leave more durable traces than wolves’ howls; and even a howl can, when traced in the right medium, survive to be interpreted and reinterpreted long after the death of the howler.34

Abram poses his account of natural signification against the foil of poststructuralism, particularly Derrida’s account of the world as text, which Abram sees as ignoring the vital role of nonhuman entities in constructing a common world.35 However, as Cary Wolfe points out in Animal Rites, the deconstructionist slogan that there is nothing beyond the text is not to be read as an idealist claim about the construction of reality through human writing, language, or thought. On the contrary, it has more to do with the materialist second-order or reflexive cybernetics of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela than it does with any sort of textual reductionism, and thus makes a move very similar, albeit from a different direction, to the one made by Abram. Where Abram seeks to identify the sensual and physical aspects of language, the deconstructionist project seeks to identify the linguistic aspects of the sensual and physical world. Both projects meet in what might be called the material-semiotic middle—that is, the recognition that meaning is embodied and that all bodies participate in the making of meaning.36 For both, an expansive and ahumanist notion of “writing” is central.

The relevance for rethinking the primary source base upon which we write animal histories should be clear, even if the practical implications remain to be worked out. As Banting argues, “including animal calls, tracks and other forms of bio-, zoo- or eco-semiotics in our notion of text” opens up the possibility of rethinking “our notions of signature, event and habitat, as well as those of subjectivity, voice, writing, author and authority, setting, metaphor, and meaning.”37 This is true not just for the present-day relations to animals upon which Banting focuses, but also for our relationship as writers and historians to the embodied traces of past animal life. The material-semiotic world is full of traces of the past, some of them human in origin, the vast majority not. All of these traces are meaningful only in relation to other traces, whose meaning, in turn, is incompletely and unstably determined by their own sets of relations. The world is a fleshly text—an embodied collection of interdependent traces.38

Geoffrey Bowker has pointed out that the idea of Earth as an archive was a common metaphor in the writings of mid-nineteenth-century geologists, who sought to reconstruct the deep past—a project in which a certain kind of animal trace, fossils, played a central role, as of course they also did in that other great nineteenth-century historical project, the development of evolutionary theory.39 My suggestion here is that we take this metaphor and its kin seriously, and that we attempt to transcend the disciplinary divide that has given the interpretation of animal traces over to the natural sciences while reserving the interpretation of human traces to the social sciences and humanities. This does not have to—and I would argue should not—entail importing scientific (or scientistic) models of animal behavior, evolution, or ecology into the humanities. As Edmund Russell has argued in his prospectus for “evolutionary history,” attention to the biological or ecological need not entail the wholesale adoption of sociobiological or evolutionary-psychological interpretive frameworks, whether applied to humans or nonhuman animals. Nor need it entail focusing exclusively on humans, as Russell suggests by limiting his focus to “the role of evolution in human history.” My hope
would be for something broader, something beyond the human—an approach in which the term “history” need not imply humanity any more than the term “evolutionary” does.40

Reconceptualizing historical sources in terms of material-semiotic traces of the past is, I believe, an important first step in opening up the possibility of such a field. Contra Fudge, it is simply not true that the “only documents available to the historian in any field are documents written, or spoken, by humans,” unless one takes a question-beggingly narrow view of what counts as a “document”—a view that seems inconsistent with the idea that documents may be “spoken.”41 Even within relatively conventional understandings of historical method, there is a venerable tradition of challenging such narrow understandings of the range of legitimate sources or documents for historical study.

Marc Bloch, the medieval historian and cofounder of the Annales school, argued in his posthumously published methodological meditation, *The Historian’s Craft*, that the historian’s knowledge of past events or actors was always “knowledge of their tracks.”42 Like François Simiand, the historical economist from whom he borrowed the phrase, Bloch sought to reconstruct the past lives of people—medieval peasants, for example—who had left little in the way of historical documents as they were conventionally defined. The trope of traces broadened the realm of potential sources from written texts to the entire world, so long as that world could be interpreted as in some way referring to the past. It also emphasized the materiality of the world of signs, marks, and remnants—the sensible, tangible things through which the historian encountered the past. As Bloch put it: “Whether it is the bones immured in the Syrian fortifications, a word whose form or use reveals a custom, a narrative written by the witness of some scene, ancient or modern, what do we really mean by *document*, if it is not a ‘track,’ as it were—the mark, perceptible to the senses, which some phenomenon, in itself inaccessible, has left behind?”43 New kinds of historical documents would bring new kinds of historical subjects—those phenomena in themselves impossible to grasp—into the historian’s purview.

Historiographical theorists have also challenged the idea that historical interpretation is limited to the interpretation of the explicit, intentional, surface themes—the denotative content—of written documents. In his essay “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg uses tracking as the core metaphor for an understanding of historical methodology.44 Historical scholarship, Ginzburg argues, is among the “divinatory” or “conjectural” modes of knowledge production—a category in which he includes art criticism, criminal forensics, psychoanalysis, medical diagnostics, and, originally and most fundamentally, the tracking of wild animals by human hunters. These disciplines operate according to the assumption that “infinitesimal traces permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality.”45 These traces are often revealing exactly because they are unintentional; the rabbit runs in order to escape, not in order to leave tracks in the snow. This divinatory style of interpretation, Ginzburg suggests, originated with primitive hunting, as did narrative itself. Just as a physician draws conclusions about a patient’s health on the basis of subtle changes in the rhythm of the heart or the sound of the breath—or, these days, from a protein marker or genetic test—so a hunter infers the past activities and present location of prey from a bent twig or a partial paw print. “The hunter would have been the first ‘to tell a story,’” Ginzburg writes, “because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events.”46 The historian’s hunt for the past similarly relies on his or her ability to imaginatively reconstruct coherent sequences of events—and their underlying causes or deeper meanings—from fragmentary, inconclusive traces.

Although Bloch’s expansive notion of historical sources and Ginzburg’s comparison
between the tracking of animals and the writing of history would seem to open the way toward including animals as historical actors or agents, neither of these authors took that leap. Bloch was quite explicit that only traces of human life should be of interest to the historian—that it was, in fact, the unique complexity of human behavior that required the historian to draw on a wide range of textual and nontextual sources. Those traces might well include the traces left by animals, but they were only properly “historical” to the extent that they shed light on human lives (much as Russell’s “evolutionary history” is distinguished from the evolutionary history of biologists by its focus on anthropogenic evolution). Ginzburg’s argument, which relies on an implicit historical progression from hunting to history, is equally anthropocentric. Though animals are clearly vital actors in the narratives told by primitive hunters, they vanish from the analogous modern-day practices of physicians, art critics, historians, and so forth, which are Ginzburg’s true subject. Animals and hunting play an originary role, providing the stuff of stories in the dawn of time; today, his account implies, they have been superseded by more civilized concerns linked to the extension of modern apparatuses of social control. Animals were, in a sense, the training ground on which humans learned the techniques and ways of thought that would allow them to track and control other humans.

Still, the tropes of traces and tracking are amenable to less anthropocentric interpretations than these. They provide a way of thinking about historical sources that does not depend on the assumption that the producer of a trace was, in a particular instance or in general, intending to leave a record or to convey a specific meaning. The vast majority of historical sources produced by humans are not, of course, intended for the eyes of historians; in many cases their authors would be surprised at the uses to which they have been put. That they are useful for a particular historical study is a by-product or accident of the fact that they were once useful for other purposes and have since been preserved and made accessible. Indeed, as Ginzburg suggests, the most valuable clues to the past are often exactly those traces that their producers did not intend to leave. Moreover, as Derrida has argued, there is much that is automatic in even the most conscious linguistic act of a self-aware human. The distinction between an automatic, unintentional, meaningless animal “reaction” and a willed, intentional, meaningful human “response,” which has been a core tenet of philosophical humanism since at least the time of René Descartes, rests on shaky empirical and philosophical ground. If intentionality were to serve as a litmus test for the legitimacy of historical sources or agents, much of human history would have to be thrown out. In the same way, the traces left by other kinds of animals besides the human need not have been left intentionally to be useful for the historian. Whether the traces make it possible to tell an interesting or meaningful story about nonhuman animals as historical actors is another question—as suggested above, an empirical one, the answer to which is likely to vary, just as it does for the history of humans, depending on the available sources, the historical situation, and the historian’s interests and capacities.

As Ginzburg suggests, there is a sense in which the historian’s method resembles that of the hunter. It seeks to imaginatively reconstruct a sequence of past events on the basis of often fragmentary evidence. While the successful hunter returns home with the body of the prey, the successful historian returns with a plausible and interesting explanation of change over time—or, in its minimal form, the bare demonstration that a particular past time was different in some nontrivial way from the present. Success depends not just on the talents and resources of the hunter or historian but also on the conditions under which he or she works. The most skilled tracker may lose the trail on bare rock; the most diligent and perceptive historian will have little to say when time has effaced the traces of the past.
The current paucity of traces for the hunter-historian to follow is neither accidental nor innocent. It is a product of the very history we want to tell. The production, preservation, and availability of historical traces is often a costly effort that reflects existing power relations and assumptions about the value of traces and their makers; the range of available sources at any given time is a product of the entire intervening history of such values. The embodied traces of the past survive to meet the historian’s eye (or ear or hand or nose) only because of a long, often circuitous and richly textured history—a history that begins before the trace is even produced, that establishes the trace’s conditions of possibility, and that therefore cannot be disentangled from whatever historical phenomenon it is we want to study or from our own historical situations. Writing requires a marker and a medium—pen and paper, figuratively speaking—and both are historically contingent, whether the writer in question is a human or another sort of animal. The marks that a particular cottontail rabbit and the owl who pursued him or her left in the winter snow more than a century ago would not have been left in the summer grass (see figure 1). Nor would those traces have survived—much altered by their transduction into another medium, but not entirely betrayed—to meet the early-twenty-first-century historian’s eye unless they had been traced in the sketchbook of a naturalist and published in a popular magazine, of which a few carefully preserved copies survive in libraries.

In the past several centuries the varieties of figurative pens and paper with which animals can leave traces for historians to read has multiplied and diversified to a remarkable extent. Since the late 1980s, to take a recent example, it has been possible for properly equipped birds to leave hourly traces of their long-range migrations in the data banks and on the computer screens of the scientists who have attached satellite-linked radio tags to them. Many thousands of other individual birds leave traces of their presence when they are banded and recaptured or resighted by professional and amateur birdwatchers. These traces are not merely human “representations” of animal movements or behavior, any more than the transcript of a court proceeding or a personal diary is merely a “representation” of the witnesses’ speech or the diarist’s thoughts. In all of these cases, which of course differ in many other ways, meaning is coproduced within a technological system of trace-making, a network of material-semiotic articulations. It would be as mistaken to dismiss the diary as providing no insight to the thoughts and feelings of the diarist as it would be to take it as a transparent window into the soul. Similarly, technical systems that make it possible for nonhuman animals to leave new kinds of traces on the world, even if built by humans, cannot be reduced to human intentionality.

Needless to say, documenting the lives of animals for their own sakes has heretofore not been a high priority of archivists, historians, or governments. Still, many potential archives are made, collected, and preserved for purposes very different than those to which later historians put them. The explosion of documentation with which modern historians are familiar, and which is tied to the state and other apparatuses of social control noted by Ginzburg, is not limited to the human; nor is it a case of extension to animals of techniques originally designed for humans, or vice versa. Both have developed as part of a single differentiated system. Scientific research is one potential source of such protoarchives, as are the records of industries and government agencies that deal closely with nonhuman animals in one way or another—whether as pests, as pets, or as sources of profit. With their noninnocent conditions of production kept firmly in view, such sources may provide the basis for a richer history—a true “animal history,” rather than merely a history of “human attitudes toward animals.” It is in the nature of archives to be built for futures that may never come, and it is one of the tasks of the historian to reappropriate such archives in the future that does.
Learning to reappropriate such archives, and perhaps even in some cases produce them, is one of the ways in which disciplinary boundaries of history might usefully be stretched. Historians who are interested in telling stories about the past in which nonhuman animals are central have good reasons to support the development of a data infrastructure that would make it easier to make contact—really, authentically, responsibly—with the embodied traces
of the past animal lives. The nature of this archive, down to the concrete details of organization and infrastructure, will shape the kinds of histories that can be written. Just as political historians work to ensure that government documents remain accessible to themselves and to future historians, or social historians gather oral histories to ensure that certain stories are not lost, so, too, might animal historians work to ensure that the embodied traces of animals (that is, all animals, not just the human kind) are preserved, reproduced, and archived so that better stories about animals, human and otherwise, can be told.55

NOTES

2. Philip Armstrong, What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1. This opening line is in dialog with the image on the cover of Armstrong’s book, a painting by Peter Zokosky of a chimpanzee sitting at a desk with pencil, paper, and coffee mug.


27. See, for example, Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

29. For an example, see the brief discussion about whether salmon can be “at” the table or merely “on” the table in William Cronon, “Speaking for Salmon,” in Joseph E. Taylor III, Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), ix–xi; Frieda Knobloch, review of Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis, by Joseph E. Taylor III, American Historical Review 106, no. 4 (October 2001): 1373–1374.


34. For a less sanguine perspective on the interpretability of such animal traces, see Fudge, “Left-Handed Blow,” 5. On the survival of traces of the dead through recording technology, see Friedrich A. Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

35. Abram, Spell of the Sensuous, 282n.2.


43. Bloch, Historian’s Craft, 55.


46. Ginzburg, “Clues,” 103. For related arguments about the centrality of hunting and tracking as the origin of narrative and as an epistemological model for other areas of human activity, see Liebenberg, Art of Tracking; Chamberlin, “Hunting, Tracking and Reading.”

47. On the subject of disciplinary distinctions, Bloch writes: “What is it that seems to dictate the intervention of history? It is the appearance of the human element.” Bloch, Historian’s Craft, 21.
50. Derrida, Animal, 112.
53. On the “politic semiotics of articulation,” see Haraway, “Promises of Monsters,” 83; on technological systems (or the “ecology”) of traces, see Bowker, Memory Practices, 4–6.
55. On archives as collections of traces, see Bowker, Memory Practices, 4–6.