

Aging Animal Bodies: Horse Retirement Yards as Relational Spaces of Liminality, Dwelling and Negotiation

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Abstract

This paper investigates how animal aging and ill-health are managed, spaced, interpreted and experienced within a horse–human relationship. It does so by exploring the active construction of ‘retirement’ as a legitimate category within the life course of an animal. The analysis is concentrated around the emergent spaces of horse retirement yards. Conceptualising retirement yards as liminal spaces of transition and transformation, particular consideration is given to the role of the yard manager in creating a good retirement for the horse. This includes negotiating and narrating figurative and bodily processes of animal aging with the distant owner. The paper reviews the yard manager’s careful enactment of re-wilding in the shaping of aged and unsound equine bodies, but also their authentic inter-weaving of practices of domestication. Balancing re-wilding and domestication, in both figurative and bodily form, appears central to securing dwelling-in-retirement on a retirement yard and therefore, successful animal aging. In accordance with the non-uniformity of liminality, however, the relational care practices which permit dwelling-in-retirement require daily attention. They remain subject to multiple potential sources of disruption, including those which extend well beyond the aged or unsound state of the individual animal.

Key words

Animal aging; human–animal relations; liminal space; dwelling; domestication and wildness; animal retirement

Introduction

20 years ago, when a horse was, useless, they shot it didn’t they? [...] And so people have changed, people’s attitudes too (RY02)

The above quote illustrates the shift in understandings towards animal aging in the context of contemporary cultures of human–animal companionship. Despite expectations regarding the ethical killing of animals, little public concern is given to the challenges posed by the process

of animal aging or situations of chronic ill health. The way in which these issues come to shape the human–animal relationship also remains unaddressed within human–animal studies. Here we take as our focus the case of horse–human relationships. We engage with animal aging by exploring the construction of horse ‘retirement’ as a mechanism for changing the category of the animal and in turn the nature of its relationship to humans. We consider the meanings of animal retirement as ways of negotiating animal aging and unsound animal bodies. We address this here in the case of those animals which can otherwise be categorised as companion and service animals.

The study of human–animal relations has become a legitimate sub-discipline within the field of human geography (Buller, 2014, 2015; Hovorka, 2016; Philo & Wilbert, 2000a; Wolch & Emel, 1995). In this sub-discipline, the different encounters between humans and animals can be understood as products of their practical actions in particular settings. The attention afforded to the situatedness of human–animal relations is encapsulated in the proposition put forward by Philo and Wilbert (2000b, p. 5) that ‘the spaces and places involved make a difference to the very constitution of the relations in play’. In this paper, we explore the ways in which the cultural concept of retirement is imposed upon aging animals. We do this by studying horse retirement yards as dedicated spaces of animal retirement. The research question which we seek to address in this socio-spatial setting is: how are animal aging and ill-health managed, spaced, interpreted and experienced within a horse–human relationship? Based on interviews with managers of retirement yards in the UK, the study analyses the retirement yard as a liminal space, transforming the role of the horse within human culture.

Theoretically, we engage ourselves in a dialogue between the fields of animal geography and critical social gerontology to create an understanding of the ways in which animal retirement is enacted. By combining the use of literature on human and animal life we aim to reach beyond the simplistic critique of animal anthropomorphism and seriously consider the ways in which socio-cultural conceptions from the human realm are attributed to animals across different practices and spaces (Crist 1999). Rather than dismissing anthropomorphism out-of-hand, we need to advance our understanding of the multiple interpretations of animals in everyday contexts. These interpretations have tangible consequences for human-animal relations and for the lives of the animals in question. Extended attention is given throughout to the concepts of liminality and liminal space (van Gennep, 1909 [1960]). We explore the care practices of yard managers in their continual negotiation of the retirement yard as a liminal setting, as well as how this liminality comes to be embodied and responded to by the horse and its absent owner. We consider how imposing the status of retirement upon a companion animal alters the shared experiences of everyday life, and look at the consequences of their emplacement on retirement yards for both individual and broader societal horse–human relationships (Laws, 1995; McHugh, 2000). In this way, we address the specific and often unexpected questions which arise from the emergence of new commercialised practices as a response to the increase in the keeping of horses for leisure. We pay particular attention to the ways in which the acknowledged position of the horse as a hybrid of nature and culture is challenged when the ‘cultured’ life of individual horses is subjected to disruption (Greene, 2008).

Retirement, liminality and space

Until the 21st century, human retirement in a Western context was generally understood as a fixed life stage associated with the ending of the working life (Sargent, Lee, Martin, & Zikic, 2013). In an economic sense, to be retired meant that you were no longer able or allowed to be of use to society because of your physical frailty. Under this logic retirement became ‘marked by absence’ (McVittie & Goodall, 2012), featuring both a figurative and a physical distance between retired people and their places and communities of work. Such an understanding essentially rendered retirement a negation of ‘normal’ life, including good health, social relations and something purposeful to do. With people now sustaining good health longer than before, however, aging has become further detached from unsoundness or ill health. Rather, in the 21st century, being retired is seen as a third age in which ‘activeness’ plays a central part:

To be active in aging has now attained the status of societal mantra. Productive activity is the route to happiness and longevity; to live otherwise is tantamount to a death wish. Retirement communities then, provide the ultimate script of successful aging, as seniors rush about as if their very lives depended upon it (McHugh 2000, p. 112).

For Moulaert and Biggs (2012, p. 27), active aging has two dimensions: ‘to be able to lead a productive life and to be free to make personal choices’. Increasingly, however, this freedom becomes interwoven with paid work as the neoliberal society intervenes, ‘equating active ageing with work itself’ (Moulaert & Biggs, 2012, p. 35). Accordingly, in conformity with a more critical gerontology, Moulaert and Biggs propose that ‘active’ aging be replaced by ‘desired’ aging, with a transition to a new, retired identity (p. 39). As Sargent et al. (2013, p. 12) similarly argue, such an alternative framing of retirement offers productive ground for exploring the ways in which ‘[t]he nature and form of identity work [...] shed new light on how individuals maintain, negotiate or reinvent the self’. In order to explore further this transition to a retired identity, we are guided here by the concept of liminality.

Coming from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold or boundary, the term liminality has been used in many disciplines to explore spaces and experiences of between-ness and transition (Herman & Yarwood, 2014). Particularly influential within this work is Arnold van Gennep’s (1909 [1960]) concept of *liminality*, which is constituted around a passage of three stages:

separation, segregation, or the pre-liminal; transition, or the liminal; and reintegration, aggregation, or the post-liminal. In the post-liminal, individuals reintegrate into their ‘new’ life, adopting a new social status and re-entering society in accordance with this new status. (Moran, 2013, p. 183)

It is during the pre-liminal and liminal stages of the passage, that ‘known norms, behaviours and identities are suspended thus giving way to uncertainty’ (Shortt, 2015, p. 637). In this sense, liminality can be ‘simultaneously destructive and constructive’ (Foster & McCabe, 2015, p. 48). Despite its popularity, van Gennep’s three stage model is, however, open to critique for its overly linear formulation. As Moran (2013) illustrates in the case of

prison visiting rooms: ‘they are experienced not once, in a linear transformation, but repeatedly, with the liminal coming to constitute a temporarily transient transformation followed not by a post-liminal reintegration [...] but a return to the state experienced before pre-liminal detachment’ (p. 183). Nevertheless, as Moran also acknowledges, when through frequentation a liminal experience becomes familiar, so too does it have ‘a subtle cumulatively transformative effect’ (p. 183).

The concept can be understood as addressing the ways in which multiple identities are attained, embodied and performed. Here we introduce van Gennep’s liminality to the study of human–animal relations, as a means to exploring the transition to animal retirement as a multi-dimensional process. In addition to considering transitions in identity, it enables us also to pay close attention to tangible physical changes, but also to changes in socio-spatial relations. That the concept of liminality can productively be applied to the relational quality of space, is widely in evidence (Dale & Burrell, 2008; Preston-Whyte, 2004; Shields, 1991). Shortt (2015), for instance, conceptualises liminal spaces as not only figurative, as in the case of ritualistic passages from one ‘state’ to another, but also physical. Alongside prisons (Moran, 2013), and hair salons (Shortt, 2015), other focal points of such scholarship include, residential camps (Foster & McCabe, 2015), hotels (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006), and beaches (Shields, 1991). In conceptualising spaces as liminal, it is critical that the personal experience of liminality to which they give rise is not conceived as uniform (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006). The question of space is equally central to the enactment of human retirement, including most visibly the emplacement of the elderly into discrete places of care (Laws, 1995, 1997). However, the non-uniform quality of liminal space is all too often absent in the representation of human retirement homes, where retirement is performed as full of vitality (Laws, 1995). In a similar vein, exploring animal retirement as liminal requires consideration to be given to the multiplicity of ways in which space affects the unfolding relationships between humans and animals.

Recent work has paid attention to the fact that the location of encounters between humans and animals, the space where they take place, influences the ways in which animals are understood and appreciated. In animal geography, physical ‘animal spaces’ have been defined as including spaces that are inhabited by animals only, spaces that are shared by both humans and animals, and purely human spaces inaccessible to animals (Philo, 1995; Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 7–11). In this paper, we concentrate on the spaces shared by humans and horses more specifically as liminal spaces where domestication is ‘continuously negotiated and held in place’ (Power, 2012, p. 371) alongside a process of re-wilding. As we will show, this is done by attending to equine bodies and identities, in pursuit of a successful transformation into dwelling-in-retirement.

Methodology

The investigation of horse retirement began as a larger study on practices of care associated with keeping horses at livery yards. In gathering information about livery yards in the UK, we found out that there was a specialist subset of yards targeted solely or primarily at owners of

retired horses. Despite being very limited in number across the UK (estimated to make up less than 1% of all livery yards) their purported specialisation in caring for elderly horses and those with long-term chronic ill health, made them of particular interest. Notable also was the fact that the phenomenon of equine retirement yards had not previously (to our knowledge) been the subject of academic inquiry. Accordingly, the data supporting this paper was primarily collected through semi-structured research interviews with retirement yard managers. Interviews were undertaken at four retirement yards. The identification of the yards involved an online search for commercial webpages and also a review of discussion forum postings on equine retirement. Because of the low number of yards identified, data collection took place across England, Scotland and Wales. The interviews took place between December 2014 and September 2016.

In the interviews, questions were asked about the daily routine at the yards, horse owners' visits at the yards, care of the aging animals, decision making, and euthanasia. Individual interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes, and they were tape-recorded and transcribed. On all but one occasion they were accompanied by a tour of the retirement yard. During the tours permission was granted for photographs to be taken at will by the researchers. The interviews were coded according to themes, following the principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorf, 2013). In this article, the analysis is organised around two inter-related categories of spatial liminality – figurative and bodily liminality – as well as dwelling. All of the interviews were anonymized and the extracts used in this article are coded accordingly (RY01–RY04).

Despite the relatively small sample size upon which this paper is based, there are, nevertheless, a number of reasons attesting to the validity of the findings presented. They include, firstly, the qualitative nature of the research design and, correspondingly, the intention in undertaking this research of securing a deeper, rather than representative, understanding of social phenomena. Secondly, whilst all qualitative research respondents are arguably experts in their own right whenever asked to share experiences from their everyday lives, notable here is that the retirement yard managers have dedicated themselves to caring for retired horses in both a professional and a personal sense. All the respondents (even where supported by additional staff) act as the main primary carer for the retired horses residing at their yards. It is also not an exaggeration to state (as will be discussed further below) that this role requires of them that they remain permanently on call '24/7'. It is because of their role as primary carer that we took the decision to dedicate our attention to this category of actors only. Moreover, all the respondents had entered into the care of retired horses on the back of having already had a lifetime of experience in owning and caring for horses more broadly. Correspondingly, despite being limited in number and type the interviews generated a vast amount, and depth, of data of direct bearing on the study subject. Thirdly, because of the extended time period over which the data collection occurred it was possible to undertake an initial full round of analysis on the first two interviews prior to undertaking the remainder. As a result, it subsequently became apparent, during the course of the last interview and confirmed during subsequent analysis that a sufficient level of data saturation had been reached with regards to the role of retirement yard managers – where they act as primary carers in the construction of equine

retirement (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Guest 2006). In the final section of this paper suggestions are, however, made as to how this research could usefully be taken forwards, including in particular through the inclusion of owners, vets and other equine care service providers in future studies.

Retirement yards as spaces of liminality

Animals that live in close relationships with humans can be conceptualised as *companion animals*, referring to the purpose of keeping them, as opposed to the instrumental use of animals (Serpell & Paul, 1994). Companion animals can be understood in terms of kinship, as close friends and family members, and as co-producing enduring social relations of mutual dependency with humans (Franklin 1999, p. 49). A companion animal is often perceived as a conscious, sentient and intentional agent that interacts with humans and participates in sharing the everyday life in an emotionally meaningful way (Charles & Davies, 2011). In the Western world, the horse, historically treated as a service animal, is increasingly understood as a companion similar to animals such as cats and dogs that are more commonly considered pets (Leinonen, 2013). During the past few decades, the horse-human relationship has been explored from a range of different disciplinary starting points. The context for much of the recent literature on horse-human relationships has been around the shift towards leisure horse riding and the associated practices of horse ownership and care (most recently e.g. Adelman & Knijnik, 2013; Birke & Hockenhull, 2016; Dashper, 2016; Davis & Maurstad, 2016; Schuurman & Franklin, 2016). However, this literature is largely silent on the role of aged equine bodies in shaping horse-human relationships.

Horse-human relationships are based on close encounters, individual interaction, and spending time together with the horse (Walker 2008, p. 19). Haraway (2008, p. 65) discusses the concept of *encounter value* as a tool for analysing lively capital—such as animals—in what she calls ‘making companions’. The concept is developed by Gilbert and Gillett in the context of contemporary equine culture: ‘when the child or adult makes a successful bond with the animal, the value of that animal substantially increases’ (2011, p. 640). Despite the individual relationship, the horse is expected to provide a service to its human counterpart; that is, to be of some ‘use’ to its owner. Commonly their use value becomes associated with various forms of ridden leisure activity. The extent to which an individual horse is deemed successful in its on-going performance of this dual role is, however, subject to much disruption through its life course. Moreover, its afforded possibility to be of service to its human counterpart potentially carries direct material and symbolic consequences. It can, for example, influence a horse’s market value, its retention by an individual owner, and the longevity of its residence at a particular horse yard. It can also influence the standard and type of care which it receives and ultimately, the circumstances which come to determine its lifespan and date of euthanasia.

A growing number of modern day equestrian industry standards, practices and social norms are effectively rendering an increasing volume of horses as being suitable only for restricted forms of use and therefore of little or no market value.¹ This represents a shift away

from the work horse era ‘Black Beauty-esque’ practice of gradual down-grading of tasks across a horse’s life course, whilst nevertheless retaining its ability to provide some form of service to its human counterpart (Nyman, 2016). It has been replaced by a dramatic free-fall of status, not necessarily tied to their age or physical ability to meet the leisure needs of amateur riders. The associated shift from use to no-use-value can occur at any point in the life course of an individual horse, sometimes from a very early age. Where linked to an identifiable physical affliction or incurable and debilitating condition, it is unlikely that this no-use-value status will be revoked. Recent advances in veterinary knowledge, however, make it possible for these horses to live well into old age. Such changes in institutional practice are seemingly closely aligned with the wider societal goal of improving animal welfare. However, they give rise to the question of what then to do with the horse?

For many owners, euthanising their horse at this life junction is not an option and may also seem unethical, if the horse’s general health and wellbeing have not deteriorated to the extent that the horse would be suffering (Schuurman & Leinonen, 2012). Since the early 1990’s, specialist spaces called retirement yards have emerged, providing care for horses after their service years at a cost in keeping with that payable on a normal livery yard. The emergence of these yards illustrate the ways in which conceptions of animal retirement and old age shape contemporary horse–human relations. They constitute ‘discrete spaces’ for the formalisation of care for aging and unsound horses (Buse & Twigg, 2014; Laws, 1997). The fact that resident horses are no longer ridden also constitutes one of the most obvious distinguishing features between the everyday routines and practices of care of retirement yards and those of normal livery yards. For a notable sub-set of horse owners, they appear to present a workable and ethical solution.

If they’ve broken down, if they’re on a competition yard, or the owner’s got a second horse coming through then they’ll want to... they come here for all different reasons. We’ve just had a 13-year-old in, he’s broken down, he’s never going to compete again, they don’t want somebody else, they don’t want him to end up on loan and then them lose that sort of, I suppose they’re losing a bit of control here, but [not] losing the ownership of him, so he’s here. Some people retire them and they’re not necessarily need to be retired, they just don’t want somebody else to have them. (RY02)

The advent of horse retirement yards supports multiple different scenarios for when retirement becomes the most viable, or ethical option. This includes, as in the above extract, those horses who may not necessarily ‘need’ to be retired but it is, nevertheless, the will of the current owner that they should be classified and attended to accordingly. All that is required is the ability and inclination to pay a monthly fee to the retirement yard manager to deliver this duty of care on their behalf. In some cases, the decision to relocate a horse arises from a belief that it is no longer ethical to continue to use a compromised equine body for human service. For others, it may reflect a high level of attachment or wish to retain control, coinciding sometimes with a moral belief in the duty to care for a horse for life, rather than as a commodity for disposal. In the equestrian culture, there is a general acceptance that it is the responsibility of the owner to care for the wellbeing of the horse (Schuurman & Franklin, 2016). This

responsibility also produces social control, in the way that owners are expected to promote their horse's wellbeing in certain ways (Birke et al., 2010). In parallel, as other respondents also indicated, it may reflect the seriousness with which some riders invest in amateur equine sports and their unwillingness to compromise their own aspirations for sporting progression due to the aged or unsound nature of their horse (Schuurman & Franklin, 2016). At the same time, it reflects an increasing purification of body soundness, or reduced intolerance for unsoundness in animal bodies, particularly within a competition context. As a consequence, and as a reflection of the relative ease with which they can be replaced, a growing number of aged and unsound horses find themselves misplaced. This includes those horses that may be of a relatively young age: 'Youngest we have is seven, and the oldest now, [Misty], must be 36.' (RY01).

Fulfilling the responsibility to care for a horse's life can encompass and accommodate wide variation in the spatial proximity between horse and human owner. Once a horse is moved on to a retirement yard, this distance becomes further compounded. This represents the way in which, for both horses and humans, a retirement yard becomes a space of presence and absence. Despite the continuation of care, from the outset the horse's owner plays only a peripheral role in its delivery. As this yard manager illustrates: 'Some owners will leave their horse here and we will never see them [...] I've got one owner, haven't seen her for 8 years' (RY02). In these cases, the 'burden' of care is seemingly wholly transferred to the professional carer, with the resulting effect of diminishing the relationship between owner and horse (Milligan, 2003). Because many owners live far away, some abroad, it is not always possible to visit the horse on a regular basis. Even where visits occur, they are generally characterised as involving only very brief encounters between owner and horse: 'some people just come for ten minutes, drive for four hours and see the horse for ten minutes' (RY01). In order to explore the reasons for such brief encounters we turn our attention to the change in care regime which is brought about by the emplacement of a horse on to a retirement yard (Laws, 1995; Lucas, 2004). In doing so, we demonstrate why horse retirement yards can usefully be understood as liminal spaces of transition and transformation. We begin with the case of figurative liminality.

Horse retirement and figurative liminality

The way in which horse retirement yards can be considered to generate figurative liminality concerns the process by which a resident horse comes to behave differently and therefore to be perceived of differently in contrast to its previous identity as a riding horse. That is, the process by which they come to take on a new identity of 'retiree' (Davies & Nolan, 2004). The transition to this identity is liminal in the sense that the status of the horse as both a companion animal and a service animal is challenged and brings a revision of the relationship between human and horse. According to Leinonen (2013, p. 163), increasingly the task of the leisure horse is to 'feel well'. In the spaces of retirement yards this idea is purified in a way not seen in other spaces. In that sense, horse retirement parallels the welfare needs of aging people and of companion animals, with a striking similarity in the way that responsibility for the welfare is placed on the family members of elderly humans and the owners of companion animals. The

horse also helps the human feel well, as in the case of the yard manager who enjoys grooming the horses: ‘I just like kind of having, kind of a spare hour and just going out and giving them all brushes’ (RY04).

As their daily routines and social relationships alter, the horses enter a space between domestication and wildness, culture and nature. They become distanced from the cultural practices of equestrianism, especially training and riding, and thereby their relationship to humans changes. Instead, as one of the yard managers explained, they become members of a herd of conspecifics in the same situation:

horses change their personalities so much coming here, because they’re going back to that herding instinct [...] they have human contact obviously every day but they’re not like in a normal livery yard, where you’d be grooming your horse, tacking them up, taking them for a ride, they suddenly have got that replacement in back to nature [...] and they go a little bit, well, feral almost (RY01)

According to Power (2012), domestication in animals living in close contact with humans is not a historical event but an ongoing process, following development in the practices of keeping these animals. A core element of a horse–human relationship is a close contact with humans in daily routines during the horse’s service-giving years (Wipper, 2000). In retirement the changing care regime results in a greater amount of distance being reintroduced, with levels of human contact becoming more akin to that experienced during the initial years of life. Retirement thereby takes the horse back towards a state when it is not fully domesticated – it is in a sense stripped of a part of its domesticated self. What remains, is the animal conceived as wilder, as closer to nature. To what extent this re-wilding is actively promoted in the daily practices of retirement yards, depends on the way in which the aspects of wildness and care are balanced by the yard manager. The need for achieving and sustaining a harmonious balance between the two dominates the various forms of liminality observed in the context of horse retirement yards.

In essence, figurative liminality is often situated (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006). The field where a horse spends most of its retirement time can be understood as a liminal space where the horse identifies strongly with the herd. In some cases, the change in identity also impacts the horse’s behavioural accordance with the role of companion animal. As is illustrated below, this may create difficulties for a visiting owners to remove their horse from this space. The following extract illustrates the moment in which the horse is already in the process of transition and the owner is the one who disrupts, having not yet themselves adapted to the transition taking place in the horse’s life:

If someone wants to take their horse away [from the field] in the summer, it really causes madness, they’ll jump out to go and follow it [...] we’ll probably take the horse on the other side of the gate so they can have some time without being attacked by the other horses (RY01)

In such a case the help of the yard manager is important in mediating this visit and the moments of interaction between the owner and the horse (Davies & Nolan, 2004). As the same respondent continues to explain:

It's hard for owners to understand when they come here, because they're used to just going to their yard and taking the horse out of the field and grooming it and taking it for a ride and I say, you can't do that here, you know, and they'll try to, and even just taking it on the other side of the gate, the horse will scream to go back to the others, and the others will be cantering around the field, even though they are in their 30s, some of them. (RY01)

Such 'transgressive' behaviour of the horse would rarely be sanctioned in a pre-retirement setting (Foster & McCabe, 2015). In the space of a retirement yard the possibility for 'counterperformance' supports the re-wilding of the horse, but simultaneously disrupts the existing companionship with the owner (Schuurman & Franklin, 2015). This is why such behaviour is more readily sanctioned by the manager:

Must be the worst thing, coming to visit your horse, because you feed it all your polos and all your carrots and then it buggers back off up the field because it's got no interest necessarily in you, and they think that they're gonna be, 'take me home Mummy' (RY02)

These extracts give an insight into the challenge of negotiating transitional, liminal identities for visiting horse owners. They also further account for why, when visits do occur, they often involve only very brief direct encounters between owner and horse. As Moran (2013, p. 182) writes, '[t]he actual spaces of visiting are intensely significant both for the nature of contact and intimacy which can take place, and for the ways in which the spaces themselves are socially constructed and reconstructed by those who occupy them'. In the context of retirement yards, the spaces reflect the varying state of the liminality of the horse. In the summer particularly, the field becomes a setting for wildness, and the gate a boundary of domestication. The owner, whose knowledge of the horse is situated in the cultural context of equine domestication, can face difficulties in encountering their horse in the realm of nature. The communication between the horses in the field is not what the owner expects and is able to respond to, let alone control. In the anti-structural sense proposed by Turner (1982), in this liminal space 'societal rules of the old world no longer apply'. In direct contrast, however, the stable, during the winter months at least, more readily accommodates a transition back to a much more 'culturised' (Marvin, 2006) and 'structured' (Foster & McCabe, 2015) form of retirement; this includes on occasion a fleeting reinstatement of the companion role of the horse:

Normally at Christmas the girls do mad things, like they buy antlers and horsey Christmas hats and take photos and normally I print them off and send them, send photos to owners to see (RY02)

The above extracts also reflect a common logic used for moving horses to retirement yards – that as they become older and less active, it becomes stressful and potentially harmful

for them to remain in an environment which contains a predominance of competition horses. For the animals themselves, figurative liminality between service and retirement, domestication and wildness, means tangible changes in their daily life. On a busy competition yard, the possibility for successful ‘aging-in-place’ is understood to be limited (Cutchin, 2003; Hopkins & Pain, 2007). In accordance with van Gennep’s (1960) thesis of periods of liminality giving rise to anxiety, the basis for such an understanding is that equine retirees cannot remain in constant flux between stages of pre- and post-liminality without confusion and stress.

In the case of retirement yards, however, being surrounded by fellow retirees and subjected to specialist care, does not in itself equate to aging-in-place free from liminal transition. Moreover, as Herman and Yarwood (2014, p. 48) explain, ‘individuals can experience a prolonged liminality, getting stuck in between [...] spaces and identities’. The notion of prolonged liminality can be applied here to the horse owners, some of whom, struggling with the transforming identity of their animal, still want to ‘do’ something with their horse and thus intervene in its process of transition. It can equally be applied to the horses’ own embodied experiences of wildness and domestication. For some horses, and at certain times of year, a particular identity and corresponding set of practices may dominate. For others, and at other times of year, the overlap and transitions between differing retirement identities are a lot more ‘fluid and porous’ (Herman & Yarwood, 2014 p. 48). In many ways, owner visits are a significant element of the occasional disruption experienced by horses in negotiating the liminal space of retirement yards. Ultimately, however, it is a much more nuanced combination of the liminality associated with the absent-presence of their caring owners, and the ongoing daily care of their aged and unsound equine bodies (Conradson, 2003; Milligan, 2003). There are thus several factors determining the extent and duration of each transitional state to be passed through, as we will now show (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006).

Bodily liminality and the environment

Liminality is not just a position of betweenness but instead, it has long been argued that there is a strong sense of liminality as transformative (Moran, 2013). In the case of retirement yards, however, it seems that there is possibility for a transformation to retirement as a post-liminal state to occur, with more than one embodied identity still being actively maintained (Herman & Yarwood, 2014). This means that post-liminal and liminal identities can exist simultaneously, or overlap, and the person – or the horse – may move from post-liminal back to liminal in certain spaces, at certain times and within certain practices. In addition to figurative identities, also transitioned in these spaces and practices, is the physical body of the horse.

The on-going negotiation of multiple embodied states and ways of being, ‘each one representing a different kind of normality and offering a different form of normativity’ (Chatterji, 2006 p. 237), can with careful management be accommodated. A horse’s transient position (Moran, 2013) between the states of domestication and wildness is susceptible to a range of influences including the gaze of their distant owner (Foucault, 1977), the care regime

of the yard and the physical spaces in which they reside and roam. Especially influential, though, in shaping the temporal patterning and duration of their differing figurative and bodily states, is the significance of the natural environment on the practicing of retirement care.

Attuning and mediating the interactions of retired horses with the natural environment featured heavily throughout all respondent accounts of their situated care practices. A first critical juncture in successfully practicing this relational work comes with a horse's arrival at the retirement yard. For many, habituating them to extended periods 'at grass' with reduced human intervention – a keystone of the retirement regime – has to be introduced gradually:

a lot of people [...] they'll often bring their horse in the summer so the horse isn't, you know, is fully relaxed by the time it gets to winter. [...] So we try and make sure that it's not kind of the scenario where the horse is being ridden seven days a week and then gets dumped in a field (laughs), 24/7 turn out with a whole load of new horses, so we try and adjust it gradually. (RY04)

The competition horses tend to be more difficult in some ways, especially the eventing ones who are not used to being out, so we might find that we turn them out for an hour and bring them in and turn them out for two hours the next week each day and then bring them in, and then try and de-sensitise them maybe, and when you go down there at six o'clock and they won't be caught, seven o'clock, eight o'clock, you sort of get the idea (RY02)

The above quotes illustrate the role of yard managers in supporting horses in negotiating the initial pre-liminal transition to a retirement regime. The managers actively assist new arrivals with way-finding from domestication to gradually increasing wildness. By 'de-sensitising' the horses, their daily routine and space of living is changed; they become accustomed to an environment that is understood to more closely resemble a 'natural' way of life for a horse, as suggested by modern ethology (see e.g. Waran, 2007). That the horses will not be caught and come to be relaxed in their new environment, is the cue for the humans that the transition is working and the horses are aligning to their new regime in the way that is intended (Herman & Yarwood, 2014). Having supported the initial transition, it then falls upon the yard managers to sustain the new retired identity for as long as is appropriate – both culturally and ethically. This is done via the maintenance of the horse's body in various ways. It is this close attendance to the body in its environmental setting, which simultaneously generates an ongoing procession of ancillary transitions between domestication and wildness. This is done individually for each horse, based on intimate knowledge of the horse's physical and mental condition and needs, produced in daily interaction and observation of the horse. Therefore, the management of the horse's body can be understood in terms of a relational ethics of caring for an animal and its welfare in a human–animal relationship (Greenhough & Roe, 2011).

Considerable emphasis is placed by yard managers on establishing clear daily and seasonal routines, across the situated practices of retirement yards. As suggested by Cutchin (2003, p. 1083) in the case of human care homes, such a space–time structure, 'with activities in those spaces often taking place at very uniform and regulated time intervals [...] is viewed

as fundamental to accomplishing therapeutic aims'. In the case of retirement yards, the space–time structure is primarily organised around a temporal division between winter and summer (Chatterji, 2006). Accordingly, at differing times of year differing emphasis is placed on maintaining an orderly and obedient body more in line with the previous identity as a service and companion animal, or permitting hair growth and taking a more relaxed approach to bodily dirt. On the majority of yards, attempts at re-wilding the horses during the summer months, restricts the types of care given to more elemental forms of bodily maintenance:

I cut their tails to give, to keep their tails fairly smart, but that's probably as far as it goes. I think most owners quite like the fact that their horses [manes] aren't pulled anymore, you know, they like to know that [...] their manes are allowed to be longer and keep them away from flies and act more like horses rather than competition horses. (RY04)

In contrast, during the winter months, regular grooming and trimming, even bathing, is undertaken by yard managers. These seasonal variations can be interpreted as boundary work (Dale & Burrell, 2008), between culture and nature, domestication and wildness, including conscious choices and decision-making by yard managers as to their understanding of the horse when it is placed outside the mainstream culture of horse keeping. In parallel, however, some variation in this understanding of what at any moment actually constitutes 'the right sort of care' (Parr, 2003 p. 219) can on occasion seemingly create tensions between practices and attitudes towards the management of retirement as an embodied state (Mol, 2008). One of the ways in which this is evidenced is in the yard managers' accounts of their practice of rugging:

last summer we must have changed rugs about three times in a day, you know, it was wet one minute, then it was hot, then it was dry, then, so you know, we were constantly back and fore, changing rugs, bringing in, turning out (RY02)

The emphasis placed by this manager on constantly attending to the horses' levels of comfort in the field suggests an understanding of the horses' aging and unsound bodies as constituting 'bodies in need' (Praterniti, 2003 p. 61; cited in Chatterji, 2006). As Buse and Twigg (2014, p. 70) explain, clothing has 'transformative qualities'. Here, however, the transformative qualities of rugging as a response to their needy bodies are seemingly more aligned with a re-imposition of a domesticated image of orderly aging (Wahl, Iwarsson, & Oswald, 2012). At the same time, though, they also permit a degree of wildness for the horses in the form of free movement in the field during harsher weather conditions, rather than confinement to a stable.

Considerable attention is placed by yard managers on communicating the care practices and the development of the bodily state of the horses to their owners.ⁱⁱ Timely and effective communication is viewed as critical to running a successful retirement regime, not least because of the absence of the horse's owner from the setting where its embodied aging is unfolding. For those choosing to include regular photos and videos, this serves the purpose of both keeping the development of a horse's physical condition familiar to their owner, whilst at the same time evidencing their standard of care. Retirement from ridden work commonly causes a notable physical change in the muscular appearance of a horse. Rather than being

interpreted by yard managers as constitutive of physical decline in aged and unsound bodies, however, its meaning is conveyed as indicative of a horse's progress towards a more natural state of aging.

one of the ladies that brought her horse the other day, she said what do you think of her condition? This was the oldest horse, and I said no it think it's perfect for the time of year. [...] it's just that everything's moving south (laughs), you know, it's just not got the muscle tone and they lose the muscle along the top line so it's going to look a bit more sort of bellied, you know. (RY03)

The various forms of communication issued by yard managers serve the purpose of endorsing the idea of successful aging (Lucas, 2004). For some, though, it can be difficult to communicate the seemingly monotonous life of the 're-wilded' horse in an engaging way. The manager sees the horse from the viewpoint of care, as opposed to the owner's perceived viewpoint of companionship:

It's very difficult, I always thought [...], I'd be clever, at, emailing, but 'your horse is fine, your horse is doing well, your horse is too fat...' It gets very difficult to find something to say! (RY03)

For others, though, this difficulty is overcome by incorporating the horses in the life of the yard manager's family, or alternatively, capitalising on particular instances in the horses' lives anticipated to bring some form of amusement or pleasure to the owner:

I send photos every now and again if somebody does something funny, or silly, or, Laurence for example last week, had wallowed in the biggest, he's grey and he'd wallowed in the biggest, he was just, there wasn't an inch of him, even the tips of his ears, and I took a picture and must have emailed it to them in Australia and said look what he's done now, you know, he was covered. [...] One of the new horses in, she was [filthy] when she came, and we've clipped her out and she's obviously stamping a lot and we've clipped her legs and we sent them a picture and they said, we've never seen her so white, you know. (RY02)

In a human-animal context the endeared reporting of 'silly' moments evidences rather than negates the presence of a caring relationship. Forms of 'narrating-the-animal' (Riley, 2011) such as this appear to serve well the communication of a horse's continuing vitality. In so doing they actively contribute to the construction of retirement yards not as spaces of 'displacement' (Pritchard & Morgan 2006), but rather, as meaningful places of affirmation, belonging and attachment (Shortt, 2015).

Horse retirement yards as liminal spaces of dwelling

For Shortt (2015) the presence of emergent meaning within a space defined as liminal creates ambiguity, leading her to question the very concept of its liminality. In response, she proposes 'transitory dwelling places' as constituting a more insightful conceptualisation:

By drawing on the temporary and transitory characteristics of liminal space and simultaneously recognizing that these spaces are ‘lived’ and re-constructed as dwellings by those who frequent them, we might better describe such spaces as transitory dwelling spaces. (Shortt, 2015, p. 655)

Building on the work of Thomassen (2012), Shortt’s conception of ‘transitory dwelling spaces’ arises from her analysis of the importance of the ‘intimate’, yet ‘peripheral’ spaces of hair salons to hairdresser’s lives (p. 654). Unclear as yet, however, is the applicability of this conception to other forms of ‘liminal’ space where evidence of intimacy, meaning and attachment are similarly present.

The concept of dwelling as such captures the way in which horses are meant to settle at retirement yards. Significantly though, whereas in Shortt’s study the spaces are frequented by the hairdressers, the spaces of retirement yards constitute the entirety of the horses’ lived environment. Moreover, understanding retirement yards as spaces of *transitional* dwelling, risks negating the level of meaning that yard managers attach to ‘retirement’ as a transformative state within a horse’s life course. By removing Shortt’s reference to ‘transitory’ and instead conceptualising retirement yards as ‘liminal dwelling spaces’, it is possible to focus on the conceptual significance of ‘dwelling-in-retirement’. This also turns attention to the transformation of the horse from a companion and service animal to a retired animal which simultaneously retains the on-going potential for ancillary transitions between the multiple figurative and bodily identities that characterise retirement. In these spaces of dwelling, the horses are then able to attain some stability, akin to post-liminality.

In practice, for many horses the time spent in residence at a retirement yard can take up a considerable portion of its lifespan:

most of the horses are here because of things like arthritis, so they can go on and on and on with that, you know, as long as they’re looking comfortable (RY04)

it’s a big financial decision. If their horse is only 14, it could live for another ten years and that’s a lot of money. (RY01)

As Cloke and Jones (2000, p. 661) note, however, ‘simply being in the same place does not necessarily create dwelling’. Rather, as they suggest, dwelling involves ‘the rich intimate ongoing togetherness of beings and things which make up landscapes and places, and which bind together nature and culture over time’ (p. 651). Cloke and Jones also discuss the way in which the concept of authenticity contributes to dwelling. On a retirement yard, authenticity plays a central role in fixing the value of retirement as a highly restorative form of care for aged and unsound horses. It is embodied most visibly through practices constitutive of re-wilding, but equally in relation to transient returns to domestication. It is worth noting, however, that authenticity itself is not a fixed or ‘idealised’ quality. As Cloke and Jones further explain,

[t]he view of authenticity of being as some original (natural) form, some blessed state, can certainly be found [...] Taken to their extreme these arguments lead to a

view of true nature, or authentic landscapes, or communities, as consisting of diminishing pockets of harmonious authentic dwelling in an ever-encroaching sea of alienation. This seems a deeply flawed view and one which would make the deployment of dwelling as a view of nature and landscape redundant. (2001, p. 657)

In line with Cloke and Jones's (2001) analysis, new forms of domestication can be woven into the identities of the retired horse in a manner which reaffirms rather than negates the authenticity of 'wildness' as central to dwelling-in-retirement. Any pre-conceived notion of a retired horse as being supported merely for the purpose of 'doing nothing' (RY01) is actively replaced by a reframing of their state of being as imbued with meaning (Herman & Yarwood, 2014). Specifically, this meaning is found in the possibility which retirement yards reportedly afford, as 'distinct' socio-spatial settings, for horses to rediscover their 'true' selves (Foster & McCabe, 2015). That is, by 'giving them a sort of end to their life being a true horse' (RY03). As another respondent similarly explained, within the space of retirement yards, the state of retirement re-ascribes purpose in a retired horse's life: 'the owners suddenly realise [...] how much the horse changes, and they almost get younger in their personality, because they've got a purpose in life all of a sudden, and they've gone back to nature' (RY01).

Even where dwelling-in-retirement has been achieved, this does not close down the possibility for a return to a pre-liminal state. This can, on occasion, be due to a change in circumstances on the part of the owner. It can result in a horse being moved to a new home, where it is once again expected to perform a service. In other cases, however, the outcome can be altogether different:

we had a horse, you know, he was quite a wealthy guy, he had a very expensive number plate on his car that would probably pay for two years of his horse [...] She was just a commodity, she was here for two years, she was only 16, healthy, and just said 'I can't afford her anymore, I've got to make cuts, I don't want her moved, because I don't want her quality of life to go down, so that's it', and that was hard, because you know, it was his property, so we had to do it to her, and putting a healthy a horse down is really horrible. (RY01)

The case epitomises the effect of the power relations at play in the hierarchy inherent in a human-companion animal relationship (Charles & Davies, 2011). Despite the emphasis on responsibility and the ethical treatment of the horse (Schuurman & Franklin, 2016), the human ultimately has the power to decide on the animal's life (Haraway, 2008, p. 80). Such cases are also suggestive that for some horses and their owners, the retirement yard remains merely a liminal space of transition. On these occasions retirement yards are therefore more aligned with Shortt's (2015) concept of 'transitory dwelling space'. Here such cases are recounted by yard managers as in contravention to the ethos and ethics of horse retirement. For the retirement yard managers then, transitory dwelling of this kind constitutes a failure in the care of aged and unsound animal bodies.

In an attempt to proactively avoid situations in which a transformation to retirement-as-dwelling is unlikely to be achieved or sustained, yard managers spoke of being selective in their acceptance of new horses. Such selectivity related not only to the perceived motivations and attitude of an owner, but also to the physical condition of the horse. That every horse in their care should retain the right to dwell-in-retirement for as long as their aged or unsound state might ethically permit, was fundamental to the identity work of these yards and to the way this permitted the yard managers to practice good retirement care (Sargent et al 2013).

Conclusions

In this paper, we have investigated the emergent spaces of animal retirement. In responding to the current absence of social scientific inquiry on the relational affects of animal aging and ill-health, we were guided by asking: how are animal aging and ill-health managed, spaced, interpreted and experienced within a horse–human relationship? We elected to narrow our exploration of this question to a context in which the practices and responsibility for primary care are undertaken by retirement yard managers (rather than by the horse owner themselves). By focusing our enquiry around horse retirement yards we have explored the liminal transitions and transformations involved as well as how they are interpreted and experienced up close and at a distance. In doing so, we have afforded attention simultaneously to the role of the yard manager in shaping the entire spectrum of the horse–human relationship at the point of retirement and beyond. This includes the influence that they exert over the identity of the horse through the practices of care which they pursue and their associated management of the yard environment.

We have used horse retirement as our way into exploring the process of animal aging in affecting the human–animal relationship. Similar to Denton and Spencer’s (2009) argument in relation to human retirement, we have attested why there is much to be gained by focusing on what animals are represented to be *doing* in retirement, such that they are understood to retain a purpose beyond their service years:

The confusing array of definitions reflects the practical problem that underlies the concept of retirement: it is an essentially negative notion, a notion of what people are *not* doing – namely, that is, they are *not working*. A more positive approach would be to focus instead, on what people *are* doing (p. 63, emphasis original)

Drawing on our analysis, we understand retirement yards as having the potential to become liminal dwelling spaces; places of meaning, attachment and association in which situated horse–human relationships have significance. For the yard manager realising a post-liminal status of dwelling-in-retirement, for as long as is felt to be ethically appropriate, symbolises successful care of aging and unsound animal bodies. In conformity though, with the non-uniform nature of liminality, even within the specialist space of a horse retirement yard, attaining dwelling-in-retirement can never be guaranteed. Certainly it is not achievable merely through the emplacement of a horse into such a space. Rather, dwelling-in-retirement requires that the yard manager constantly negotiates and attends to a series of figurative and bodily

transitions between domestication and wildness across the retirement years. Ultimately, this results in the constant reconceptualisation of what it is to be an animal living with humans, in relation to both humans and other animals, and what it is for the human to be in a relationship with such an animal.

The yard manager's intimate care for the embodied process of animal aging and ill health, together with their timely translation and narration of the changing state of the horse, proves central to establishing a 'desired' retiree identity (Moulaert & Biggs, 2012). For some horses (and their owners), this culminates in retirement as constituting a legitimate, authentic, post-liminal category of horse–human relationship. For others, however, the horse may remain, or revert back to, a state of 'prolonged liminality' between life and death (Herman & Yarwood, 2014). Ultimately then, the possibility for attaining and sustaining dwelling-in-retirement is determined not merely by a careful attendance to the bodily process of animal aging and ill health. Successful aging, during the transformative time and space of animal retirement, is constituted as much by what is kept figuratively and physically present, as by what is kept distant to, or what becomes absent from this human–animal relationship. Understood in such a way, animal retirement represents the process of 'becoming with' an animal other, and that partners never pre-exist their relationship, not even in aging (Barad, 2003; Haraway, 2008). Instead, the process of aging in companion animals such as horses embodies the very challenges of the categories defining the place of animals in relation to humans. This is epitomised in the need for managing and negotiating the different practices that constitute situated human–animal encounters as enactments of human–animal space.

In building on and extending the contributions of this paper, there is much more to be done in order to address and identify further knowledge gaps regarding the tangible ways in which human concepts affect the care of animals. This includes the negotiation of companion animal aging and ill health within human-animal relationships. Perhaps most obvious here, is the need for further research into how aging and ill health are experienced, interpreted, spaced and managed by animal owners. This could involve those who contract out the primary care to others, and those who elect to retain the responsibility for primary care themselves. At the same time though there is much to be learnt from bringing in the voices and practices of other providers and spaces of care. Within the horse world this includes, to name but a few, veterinarians, farriers, livery yard owners, riding school managers, grooms, equine physiotherapists, saddle fitters and trainers. Opening up the research in this manner, permits a much broader, but also deeper, understanding on the ways in which horse retirement is viewed and responded to within the equestrian community, and the reasons reported by horse owners for the use of retirement yards. It will also further contribute to a wider understanding of how intermingling conceptualisations of human and animal life not only promote the anthropomorphising of animals, but also actively shape animal categories and human-animal relationships in society at large.

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ⁱ This includes the common practice of subjecting horses to pre-sale veterinarian examinations which they will either ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. Also, the universal requirement, enforced as both a regulatory and social norm, that no horse should compete in equestrian events unless they are of sound limb and gait.

ⁱⁱ Most commonly by way of text messages, Facebook, and newsletters