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Mustang: The Paradox of Imagery

What is a mustang? Or, more importantly, what do we imagine it to be? In accounts of the history of the wild horse, the mustang wavers between being a pest to be eradicated and a cultural symbol worthy of protection. How can one animal evoke such passionate and conflicting responses? My paper explores how different images influence beliefs and ultimately the management of mustangs on American public lands. Thomas and Thomas state, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (571-572). This idea provides a way to discuss the controversy surrounding the management of mustangs. As Latour and Haraway remind us, mustang images transcend binaries of the real and the imaginary or human and nature, creating a hybrid that is constantly shaping and being shaped by culture, technology, nature, and people. What the mustang means to culture changes, depending on representations, images, and symbols.

The mustang's various images are not objective truth, but are subjective understandings; depending on the experiences or context of the viewer, the mustang can be seen as an object of beauty or as a pest to be eradicated. While the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act (1971) provides a standard process for managing all mustangs by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), it does so with little regard for the varied meanings these animals have for United States citizens. Local interpretations of the law vary, however, based on an individual's or group's image of the animal. These public images are important because they tell us about the cultural context. On one hand, historical and beautiful images of the mustang attract tourists to public lands and small towns that they may never otherwise visit. Some of these western towns rely on the money generated through this tourism. At the same time, public lands possess energy resources, and the mustang herds complicate the extraction of these resources. In this way, what was once a historic and beautiful animal becomes a competitor standing in the way of human progress. Unless the BLM confronts this perception, it could ultimately result in the extermination of free-roaming mustangs ("Factsheet").

This article uses an anthropological approach to study the position of the mustang in American culture. Historically, anthropology has focused on the exotic, which, Peirano suggests, creates a geographic and cultural distance between researchers and their studies. By investigating cultures other than their own, anthropologists have created the

construct of the “Other,” which has created a “discourse of alterity” (Thomas 3), or, as Traube would argue, results in viewing the world as binary contrasts, sorting behavior into opposed spheres such as nature vs. culture.

Societies follow different customs regarding which animals are deemed edible, which animals have ritual uses, which animals are scorned, prohibited, and tabooed, and how animals are ranked, both in comparison to one another and in comparison to humans. Animal classifications are not naturally given, but rather a matter of language and culture. In the United States, according to the binary model, culture is associated with humans and nature is associated with other animals. Animals then become the Other and ultimately inferior to humans, a belief supported by our Christian theology: “God gave humans absolute rights to use animals as they saw fit” (Franklin 11). In comparison to other species, however, the mustang does not fit into just one culturally constructed category; a mustang can be both wild and tamed. Leach, Douglas and Tambiah recognize that when a species straddles binaries it is likely to be viewed negatively and demonized, and this is so for the mustang.

This essay, therefore, examines American culture from a less traditional approach, one which allows us to address many concerns, including geographical boundedness and “non-places.” Understanding what a mustang means no longer requires physical proximity with the animal. Further, with increased technology and mobility, the movement or flow between cultures becomes increasingly important, creating images, representations, and symbols that merge into belief systems about the mustang. Different communities of sentiment emphasize one understanding of the mustang over other possible interpretations, resulting in the sponsorship of a particular management approach over all others. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai discusses how communities of sentiment created through media and travel shape images, while Di Leonardo would add that they blur the boundary between the animal and what it means.

How we think about the mustang has real consequences for its management. According to Arluke and Sanders, although mustangs arguably have a unique physical being, “they are given a cultural identity as people try to make sense of them, understand them, use them, or communicate with them” (9). This complex identity, coupled with the fact that the determination of their destiny rests in urban centers devoid of direct contact with the mustang, allows images to be easily manipulated. The BLM manages mustangs as if they mean the same thing to everyone, an approach that, as Couldry suggests in *Inside Culture: Reimagining the Method of Cultural Studies*, often results in ongoing controversy, in this case, between the BLM and the public. Because images of

mustangs lie within an embedded cultural context, anthropological inquiry offers the best approach for uncovering complex meanings and contributing to their humane management.

Constructing the Mustang. In 1807, Zebulon Pike, on his journey from Mexico to Texas, coined the term *mustang*, referring to the wild horse herds he encountered. Prior to this time, a variety of terms were used to refer to horses discarded by ranchers or Indians in the West: *mesténada* (mustang horse stock), *cimmaron* (runaway slave), and *marron* (ownerless animal of domestic breeds) (Dobie 94); the term *mustang*, an English corruption of the Spanish word *mesteno*, has endured (Thomas 30). The *mustang* has not changed as a species, but with the urbanization of the west, federal protection, and containment on public lands it has been constructed in many ways. As Kirkpatrick says,

To the wildlife purists, the wild horse is not even considered a legitimate claimant to the title of wildlife. The thoroughbred breeder and other enthusiasts of the domestic horse world see only ugly, ill-proportioned “jugheads” that have let their genes go to seed, so to speak. Those with an appreciation for history see an animal that changed the very destiny of man here and abroad. Those who are especially fond of U.S. western history see the horses as a legacy left by our forebears, both native and immigrant. The western rancher sometimes sees only a ward of the state that is eating grass that might better go to his cattle or sheep. Finally, members of Congress see the wild horse as a fact of life that generates a great deal of their mail and a species that can consume federal dollars on the same scale they can consume grass. (157)

A *mustang* is more than just an animal; it is the creation of interactions between people and images in a world of cultural, economic, and political agendas.¹ The diversity of images Kirkpatrick describes is echoed in the comments of an initial interview: “If you talk to ten different people about *mustangs*, you will get ten different responses to what they represent.... it is a very emotional issue” (Dalke 79).¹ There is not one *mustang*, but many images of *mustangs*, which are used to further socio-political agendas. The three images most used are the historical icon, the pest, and the object of beauty; the *mustang* as a historical icon has allowed for the protection of the animal, but this image does not always assist in its placement in domestic settings, while the *mustang* as a pest is best understood in contrast to its image as an object of beauty. All of these images give insight into what a *mustang* means to post-industrial United States culture and they

may simultaneously contribute to the animals' eventual demise. Constructing these images is complex; the media, personal experiences, and an ever-changing cultural context create many impressions of mustangs that ultimately must be managed by the BLM, but once these images have entered the socio-political arena, such complexity is lost.

Mustang as a Historical Icon. The images the wild horse evokes are directly tied to its history in the United States. This is not surprising, since the dialectic between structure and human action is always set within a particular spatial and temporal context of power relations.² However, space and time are no longer thought of as bounded entities, but rather as flows. As Appadurai says:

Modern nationalisms involve communities of citizens in the territorially defined nation-state who share the collective experience, not of face-to-face contact or common subordination to a royal person, but of reading books, pamphlets, newspapers, maps, and other modern texts together. In and through these collective experiences of what Benedict Anderson calls "print capitalism" and what others increasingly see as "electronic capitalism" such as television and cinema, citizens *imagine* themselves to belong to a national society. The modern nation-state in this view grows less out of natural facts—such as language, blood, soil, and race—and more out of a quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination. (161)

Appadurai's comment illuminates the quandary of the wild horse. In many respects it is an icon of national freedom produced through media images, but fed to an urban public relatively isolated from the public lands where the mustang roams. This dissonance between the actual experience of the mustang and the barrage of historical images it evokes allows a variety of beliefs about the wild horse to emerge and gain a following. The exchange of information results in the wild horse becoming a product of a collective imagination that views it as an icon of freedom. The image of the wild horse becomes more precarious when political, social, and economic forces enter into the context.

While the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act establishes mustangs as a natural heritage species, providing protection from harassment and abuse, the law does not change the many conflicting beliefs that people have about them. The title "natural heritage species" was designated because of the claim that mustangs are not wild like

the wolf, nor domesticated like cattle. The title protects mustangs, but it also distinguishes them from wild animals, placing them somewhere between wild and domestic, placing them in a category of ferality. The title can be manipulated to show the importance of the wild horse as a symbol or discounted as a title employed simply to protect an animal that otherwise referred to as feral: "The issue of feralization and the use of the word 'feral' is a human construct that has little biological meaning except in transitory behavior, usually forced on the animal in some manner" (Fazio 3). This different approach to history and time has extraordinary impact on mustang management agendas.

Although horses originally evolved in North America, they are not considered indigenous. They became extinct and were reintroduced by the Spanish. According to Budiansky, during Columbus' second voyage to the New World, he arrived at Hispaniola with 24 stallions and 10 mares (40). Other explorers, such as Coronado and De Soto, also brought horses to the New World. Although these Conquistadors had contact with the Plains Indians, their short expeditions did not allow enough time for the Native Americans to learn how to adapt the horses to their culture. Since Native Americans did not confine their horses, however, it was the first time that horses could escape man's domination and graze and breed upon the open plains (Ryden 290-294). In many respects, this was the beginning of the American mustang and legends that would impact culture.

The impact of the horse once it was adapted to the Native American cultures was profound. The period from 1640-1880 has been called the period of Indian horse culture, with the horse becoming a vital form of transportation. In addition, it aided in the exploration of the West, was used on the first farms, provided the fastest medium for communication prior to the telegraph, and permitted the mounted Cavalry to become a fixture in newly opened regions of the West (Caras 149-150). Not only did the horse perform many functional roles, both Flores and Ryden describe how it influenced every aspect of life, including material culture, gender relations, and the creation of stories, art, and ceremonies, enduring as a symbol to the present day. The association among mustangs, the West, and cowboys was indicative of this time period.

As cattle production became important to the American economy, ranchers came to view the mustangs as competitors and pests. At the turn of the century, mustangs were rounded up and killed. Later, in the 1920s, they were used as horsemeat in pet food. During the Great Depression and throughout World War II, horsemeat became a staple

in the diet of Americans and Europeans. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, ranchers eliminated the challenge of competitive grazing by poisoning water holes and shooting wild horses on sight (Wheeler 27).

Between 1900 and 1950, more than a million mustangs were killed, the slaughter often condoned by and paid for by the BLM: "Some [mustangs] were riddled with shotgun pellets and dragged aboard trucks half dead, others had their nostrils tied with baling wire, their legs broken, their eyes gouged out" ("Fight" 48). In many respects, mustangs were viewed as pests competing for valuable forage, but in the 1950s issues concerning humane treatment began to emerge, shedding new light on the mustang.

Local legends, tourism brochures, television, the Internet, and other forms of media convey images of the mustang that associate it with different times in its history. In this community of sentiment, the mustang is most strongly associated with cowboy culture. In the early nineteenth century, cowboys were not respected figures; compared to sheepherders, cowboys were ethnically diverse, young, and had little money. Tyler, in his book, *The Cowboy*, repeatedly stresses how the cowboy, who broke wild horses, represented all that was uncivilized. The mustang came to represent freedom, independence and the uncivilized merely by its association with the cowboy.

The mustang in association with the cowboy continued to be transformed through oral legends, dime novels, Wild West shows, and movies. Television began to reach more people than any other mode of communication by the mid-twentieth century, creating mythology about cowboys and mustangs, and viewers believed what they saw. Even cowboys began to conform to the televised images of themselves: "Romanticism about the mustang was born alongside this reinvention of cowboys and the West" (Herzog and Galvin 77-92). The mustang becomes an object of beauty and wonder as it moves across an idyllic, natural landscape. The mustang is no longer an animal, but an image of an animal contextualized in romanticism.

Today, according to Lloyd, "There is no longer a frontier to conquer, yet Americans still identify with the values cultivated by generations of ranchers, independence, endurance, freedom, family, and kindness" and through images created by television and other forms of media (1). Whether these are truly values of the West or something created by television and the movies is uncertain, but it does not really matter. Historians argue that the West as an open and individualistic frontier is an old-fashioned idea or myth, but it is nevertheless part of the American intellectual landscape (Etulain 42-45): much of what people believe about the West is mythology

and its history is a combination of images, representations, and symbols. Depending on the marketing strategy, the mustang becomes an icon of individualism, an ambassador of the Old West, or the epitome of the true American (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Mustang: Image of Cultural Icon

Although the purpose of the image may change, the wild horse exemplifies in every case the most resonant American value: freedom (Bellah 1985). Take as an example the Ford Mustang, a fixture in American popular culture since 1964 that owes much of its appeal to its four-legged namesake. The marketing strategy attracts individuals who want a free-spirited and nonconformist approach to their driving experience. At the same time, it influences how people understand mustangs and “know” what they are like. In essence, the mustang is once again recreated in popular culture, linking us to our history. Although there is no direct contact with the animal, people imagine what it must be like based on its association with a car. The mustang becomes a powerful and independent creature that savors its freedom.

Viewing a mustang as an historical icon has protected this animal since the creation of The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, but it also limits the mustang’s full incorporation into American culture. Mustangs, because of their status, are not quite like the domestic horse, but also are not fully wild, resulting in contradictory management approaches. Some BLM agents are focused on an adoption strategy, which assumes their domesticity, while others focus on adaptation, treating the animals as wild. Neither approach has proven to be a successful solution to the management of

mustangs for a variety of reasons. For one, managing nearly 200 hundred ranges in ten states through governmental authorities who are primarily located in Washington, D.C. is an overwhelming task. Also at issue is that both adoption and adaptation strategies are concerned with minimizing program costs and adhering to legal constraints, often at the expense of the animals when environmental disasters such as droughts and fires occur or when political agendas are more concerned with natural resources on public lands. Finally, while adoption and adaptation strategies do work together as management tools, implementation often results in emphasizing one to the exclusion to the other. The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act prevents euthanasia of mustangs, except in special health situations. Each year, however, more mustangs are captured than are adopted, resulting in placement at holding facilities where they require shelter, food, and medical treatment. According to Gorey, the cost of this program to taxpayers was \$38.8 million in fiscal year 2007 (4). When there are too many animals in holding facilities, creating opportunities for more adoptions becomes the primary management approach, since euthanasia is not an option.

The adoption orientation emphasizes how the mustang can become a pet or show horse, pushing the mustang into the domesticated category. This strategy is not overtly discussed at roundups because people immediately see the mustang through a domesticated lens: "Wow, look at that one! What a pretty horse...such a kind eye!" (Dalke 124). These comments made during the trapping process focus on capturing animals that the public will likely adopt because of their color, temperament, or their resemblance to images on tourism brochures or movie posters that emphasize a BLM media campaign of "Adopt a living legend..." While adopting a historical icon is enticing, horsemanship skills that have been disappearing since the introduction of the car are needed to assure success (McShane and Tarr 180-181). As a result, too often people without these skills are adopting an image that they find difficult to manage, and these negative adoption experiences perpetuate myths about mustangs: 1) they cannot be tamed, 2) they are dumb and inbred, 3) they are only worth the \$125 adoption fee, and 4) they are ugly and have poor conformation (Gentzler, n.p). The responsibility is not placed on the human trainer, but rather on the "wild" animal. Skeptics of the adoption approach often view the mustang as a wild animal and want to manage it for adaptation and survival on public lands.

The adaptation management strategy focuses on the horse in its wild and free-roaming state, and relies on science and technology. Because most BLM agents have a background in animal science, they view the horse as another animal that must be managed as part of a larger system, and adaptation orientation is often a more

comfortable fit with the multiple use strategy of public lands. The BLM manages public lands for all types of animals and uses, with little concern for individual animals or a particular species. According to The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, nearly 200 different mustang populations must be viewed equally, all within a multiple-use emphasis that focuses on maintaining viable and sustainable public lands. Imagining the mustang through a historical lens does not always match the physical appearance of mustangs on the range. At roundups where the mustangs are captured for potential removal in an effort to maintain public lands, comments from influential humane groups or local citizens question the BLM's ability to successfully implement an adaptive approach: "Those horses lived out there for years surviving in places no respectable horse would live, and they did just fine. Those ranchers destroyed the range, and now they complain about too many horses. That is all the BLM is worried about" (Dalke 124). Comments such as this suggest that the BLM is concerned with doing a job but is devoid of any commitment to preserving a historical icon. The expectation is that mustangs will be beautiful like the images in magazines, movies, or the Internet. When mustangs look less colorful or smaller than imagined, questions emerge regarding the skills of the BLM: "I don't know what the Bureau of Land Management is doing. I have lived here over 20 years and when I first came to this canyon the horses were larger and better looking" (*Ibid*). When there is a discrepancy between images and the actual animal, the BLM management style is called into question. It is true that selection of certain animals could alter the herd over a period of time, but environmental catastrophes on public lands can also contribute to physical changes in mustangs. In either case, the BLM often chooses alternatives that do not satisfy any group.

The BLM is in a precarious position. If it manages horses by selecting for color and size as advocates for increasing adoptions recommend, it may not contribute to the animals' viability on public lands. If the BLM manages for adaptation, less colorful and smaller mustangs may not meet expectations of potential adopters. Yet the BLM focuses on practical management with little regard to historical importance, causing the issue to resurface especially during difficult socio-economic times (Warrick and Eilperin). The mustang as a historical icon changes to an animal that has outlived its utility when wildlife advocates, cattlemen, and recreational groups emphasize other animals (e.g. wild animals to hunt or publicly grazed cattle) as more important contributors to local economies, often using images of less colorful and adaptive mustangs to enhance their agenda.

Challenges to the historical importance of the mustang culminated in the 2004 “Burns Amendment SEC. 142. Sale of Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros,” a rider furtively attached to the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2005, which allows for the sale of mustangs and for their potential slaughter, and was signed into law by President Bush on December 8, 2004. This one small action by then-Senator Burns of Montana eradicated more than thirty years of grassroots advocacy and legislative protection, suggesting euthanasia of excess mustangs in holding centers as the only viable alternative. The mustang’s image as a historical icon is reduced to a frivolous fancy that must be replaced by the “real” needs of a post-industrial nation attempting to meet its insatiable consumption of natural resources. On one hand, the wild horse is valued for its historical association with the West. On the other hand, it is believed, “if you can’t hunt it, and you can’t eat it, and you can’t wear it – and I can’t sell it – it should not be allowed on my public land” (Ryden 291). The mustang as a historical icon has become both an image of beauty and a useless entity not worthy of protection.

One Man’s Pest is Another’s Object of Beauty. The encroachment of urban areas on wilderness areas is an obvious reality, but our public lands, although intensely managed, maintain the dream that there are parts of our country not yet civilized by human hands. Both what is “real” and what we “create” influence how we see the world; the mustang and the beliefs about it tie us not only to our history but to our place in nature and whether they are accurately portrayed does not really matter according to Carlson in the book *The Cowboy Way*.

Although sociobiology is a controversial field, the concept of biophilia helps explain the quest of humans to become part of the whole (Sabloff 53-54). According to Wilson,

The biophilic tendency is nevertheless so clearly evidenced in daily life and widely distributed as to deserve serious attention. It unfolds in the predictable fantasies and responses of individuals from early childhood onward. It cascades into repetitive patterns of culture across most or all societies, a consistency often noted in the literature of anthropology. These processes appear to be part of the programs of the brain. They are marked by the quickness and decisiveness with which we learn particular things about certain kinds of plants and animals. (85)

The need to believe in wide-open spaces and beautiful animals creates a relationship with a greater whole, as Edward Abbey states: “A man could be a lover and defender of the wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, power

lines, and right-angled surfaces. We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. We need a refuge even though we may never need to go there” (129). There is a positive emotional attachment to this image regardless of the location of the viewer, and it cannot be discarded with rational arguments.

Understanding images of mustangs requires an examination of opposing beliefs; as the old saying goes, “one man’s trash is another’s treasure.” What makes something valuable? The implementation of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act inadvertently created a commodity, which, according to Marx, is “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (n.p.). Marx goes on to discuss the difference between the two powers of a commodity, use value and exchange value. Use value is when a commodity fulfills a particular human desire and is qualitatively different from exchange value as it cannot be easily quantified. Use value as theorized by Marx extends beyond simple, pragmatic uses (such as the mustang for transportation or labor power) and can incorporate notions of aesthetic or spiritual use. For example, how do you quantify the feeling evoked by mustangs running across the open desert with manes and tails waving in the wind? The picture below attempts to capture this feeling that can enhance our lives aesthetically and spiritually, yet such values are often not incorporated into discussions of the economic value of mustangs as a commodity. (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Mustang: Image of Beauty

Images like the one above meet emotional needs, but do not provide the total picture of the mustang. Learning about mustangs through media images and living with the animals in a community are very different experiences. Managing horses from a distance is possible, but it requires sensitivity to those living near mustang ranges. Discussions at public hearings reveal the difference between beauty and the reality of animal management. For example, at a national BLM meeting, an animal advocacy group member said, "If we are going to consider them wild, then they need to fend for themselves and there is going to be starvation!" (Dalke 80). Some gasped at the statement, but it was obvious that wildness and strength were defining elements of her imagery. Upon further discussion, it became clear that the speaker believed that these mustangs could overcome anything, and if starvation did occur it would be a quick and only a few would be impacted. Being from an urban center in the East, she had not experienced the animals or the public lands directly; she did not understand how a mustang could not find enough to eat on several thousand acres, nor had she seen them starve. In this scenario, the image was so strong it blocked the realities of the local conditions. Believing that these strong, beautiful, independent creatures can survive in any condition, she advocated a *laissez-faire* management style.

On the other hand, what makes a mustang beautiful locally is an animal that is healthy and attractive to tourists. While proximity to mustangs might suggest that management will focus on the animal, assuring that it is healthy and attractive, there is little acknowledgement that local communities may be acting in their own best interests rather than in that of the mustangs.

Letting an animal starve, as in the previous scenario, does not make sense to local communities trying to attract tourists; viewing emaciated mustangs meandering across a desert negates the imagery that tourists seek. Locals, who make comments such as "they [U.S. Department of Interior] don't know what we need out West" and "We have lived with these animals for all our life; we should be able to manage them" believe they—not the national management—know what is best for the mustangs, essentially claiming that beautiful horses are created out of less governmental intervention (Dalke 69). Managing mustangs at the local level seems to make sense, since people live in the same conditions as the horses. Without a larger entity focusing on the mustangs, however, local communities seeking *laissez-faire* management from the federal government may act in the best interest of their human populations

Creating the image of the beautiful mustang requires an emic (insider's) and etic (outsider's) understanding of geography, history and politics. The beautiful mustang

becomes an image used not only by those who claim it as a national symbol, but also by those who see it as part of their unique local culture. For those who do not live in close proximity to a range, where they think a mustang lives and where it actually lives are not the same thing. What makes a mustang beautiful in the abstract is its association with the uncivilized or the “natural.” At a Tourism Summit in Utah, it was stated, “People from the East Coast have no frame of reference for how big our state is and the farther away they come from, the wilder they want it...wild rivers, wild horses, wild Indians (Benson). Belief in a place where nature determines survival intertwines itself with a laissez-faire management style that could potentially contribute to the starvation of thousands of animals. At the local level, creating mustangs that are visually pleasing to tourists could lead to deformities and potentially harm the viability of the herds. Assuring that mustangs will endure requires recognition that beliefs and imagery impact management decisions at every level. The image of the beautiful mustang is not used for a single ideological agenda, but is one that can be mobilized to argue a number of positions. It is less about the animal and more about human desires. The same can be said when viewing a mustang as a pest.



Figure 3: Mustang as Pest

In *Capital, Vol. 1*, Marx identifies the second power of a commodity as its ability to be exchanged for another commodity: exchange value.

The image of a mustang as a commodity means different things, depending on the commodity definition used. In the highly complex cultures in which the mustang is embedded, however, the local understanding does not always match the national economic agenda. Photographs like Figure 3 can convince a national public that mustangs are straggly animals draining needed dollars from an already challenged economy. The pest image is often easily accepted, as it fits well with other cultural beliefs, according to Moran in *People and Nature*. First, the United States embraces the belief that humans have superiority over all other animals; second, we live in a culture of individualism; and finally, these conditions exist in a society focused on capital accumulation. When pressed to make a decision between human needs and mustangs, the answer seems simple, especially when photographic evidence (Figure 3) is emphasized in newspapers and television coverage.

The diversity of mustangs across ranges has complicated the management of these animals; what is interesting about every example is that when the horse is given a special title, it is valued more and people want to protect it. During the Congressional Hearings of 1971, the issue of selectively “breeding back” to the “real” Spanish mustang arose. At that time, DNA analysis did not exist, but particular color patterns and skeletal structures suggested an association with the Spanish Barb or Andalusian horse. Since no hard scientific data could establish the difference, a law protecting all wild horses emerged. It was not until years later that with the discovery of mtDNA analysis these observations regarding unique traits would be validated (Oelke 19-20). It should be noted that there are no “pure” mustangs living in the wild and there is no way to completely confirm breed lines of these animals. Depending on where one goes in the West, mustangs managed by the BLM vary in color, size, and conformation due to environmental conditions and original stock in these areas. As stated earlier, all mustangs are of Spanish descent to some degree since no horse could be found in the United States until the Spanish reintroduced them to the continent. After analysis, two guiding principles separate Spanish mustangs from other BLM mustangs: 1) Spanish mustangs tend to be of a certain color or pattern of color, and 2) when a herd has been identified as Spanish there appears to be more human intervention, emphasizing a conformation standard.

Although no one would say directly that the Spanish mustangs were more valued than other BLM mustangs, observations revealed that people would most often categorize and remark about features associated with the Spanish mustang including color or striping on the legs. The more I spoke with people involved with mustangs, I came to learn of other “special” mustangs (e.g. the Nokota horse of the Dakotas, the Spanish

Colonial Horse, the Kiger horse, and the Sulpher horse in Utah). Although domestically bred horses can be sold for millions, the following story by Jeff Barnard gave legitimacy to these claims:

When the bidding started Saturday on a 6-month-old Kiger mustang filly fresh off the range 91-year-old retired wildlife biologist Bob Smith sat in the front row and kept his yellow bidding card held high. Smith had agreed to pay a record \$19,000 for the privilege of adopting the wild horse of his dreams. 'Most wild horses are just that, feral horses,' said Smith, looking like anything but a high roller in a crumpled felt hat, faded green quilted jacket, and frayed tan slacks. 'But these are the Spanish mustangs.'

The attempt to protect mustangs as an exchangeable commodity both helps and hinders their management. If a herd gains a special status, it is more easily marketed to the public, and adoptions increase. However, once the horses are adopted, private citizens begin breeding these mustangs. These bred mustangs now compete with animals managed by the BLM. Bred mustangs merge the hardy quality associated with BLM mustangs with human selection for marketable traits: height, conformation, color. The creation of these special mustangs creates a different Other, making BLM mustangs of even lesser value. Because scenarios like this continue to emerge, the BLM has had to adapt its management style, while combating culturally constructed beliefs. The current approach to elevating BLM mustangs focuses on ability rather than conformation in an event called the Mustang Makeover.

"The Mustang Makeover" is an annual event that teams horse trainers from a variety of training specialties (e.g. dressage, reining) with BLM mustangs. The trainers are given 100 days to work with the animal, culminating in a competition for prize money. After the competition, the horses are auctioned off to the public. This event increases the placement of mustangs and dispels the myth that they cannot be trained. The event has been received favorably by the public as a spectacle of interspecies communication, but this new approach may lose its effectiveness after several events show that the mustang can be trained like any other horse. If this occurs, the mustang must compete with many different breeds. The underlying motivation is to create a commodity that has **exchange** value. Although the "Mustang Makeover" is the current approach to promoting the placement of mustangs, it is still subject to the laws of supply and demand. This trained group of mustangs will likely find placement, but it is only a small number of the 25,000 animals in holding facilities. Once again, those other animals are imagined to be useless.

Treating a mustang as a commodity with exchange value enables the placement of some animals, but further marginalizes others. Mustangs and domestic horses are the same species; both types of animals exist along a continuum of conformation and ability standards. The worth of these animals is a human construction. The image of a pest rests upon the belief that humans are outside of nature and able to assess the value of other living creatures. The mustang is embedded in a culture dictated by the laws of supply and demand. If humans need raw materials on public lands, they have the power to perpetuate the pest image. Devaluing the mustang eliminates competition over finite resources and allows for its extermination while rationalizing its extermination as part of the quest for human survival.

Conclusion. Initially this study was intended to be a traditional ethnography of the American West. Ethnography gives texture and meaning to often abstract concepts that can only be understood through participant observation. To understand what a wild horse is and what people think it is once required, from the perspective of traditional ethnography, being around animals and the people who live near or care for them by visiting ranges and participating in gathers. But as the world changes, there is less opportunity to study cultures that are isolated from the larger global system. There was no classic site for studying the mustang. It required weaving together seemingly disparate actors and sites from different conceptual and physical spaces and following the images of mustangs was a way to follow the flows of knowledge. The Internet, media images, museums, travel brochures, and tourists are all elements that construct mustang images and link local communities to national and transnational communities of sentiment.

Constructing mustang images is a cultural process. It is not linear or rational. To many biologists and environmentalists, the mustang is an invasive species. Examining the images of the mustang through an anthropological lens recognizes it as a cultural symbol of great significance and diversity. Reducing any entity to just its biological and ecological usefulness disregards its cultural importance. Technology provides us with the illusion that images are factual, but we must remember that they are taken by an individual who has a personal understanding embedded in a cultural context. The mustang has not changed, but its cultural image is in constant flux.

Since the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, the BLM has had the responsibility of managing wild horse herds throughout the American West. Although the BLM has done a great deal to manage these horses from a biological and wildlife management perspective, it has paid little regard to cultural understanding of

the public images of the mustang. Images do matter when it comes to managing mustangs and must be part of the equation if mustangs are to endure on our public lands.

Notes

With special thanks to Jessica Demovsky and Katie Stilp.

1. Quotations from anonymous interview subjects are taken from my 2005 dissertation, *The Real and the Imagined: An Ethnographic Analysis of the Wild Horse in the American Landscape*.

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