Mutual corporeality: Gender and human/horse relationships

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SYNOPSIS

In this article, we explore how gender is enacted within human/animal relationships – specifically, between people and horses. Horse cultures can be gendered in several ways, from little girls and their ponies to modern versions of the cowboy. Here, we examine two specific horse/human cultures – traditional “English” riding, and the rise of what is often termed “natural horsemanship” (despite the preponderance of women within it).

Horses themselves, however, play an important role in the way that horsey cultures become experienced as gendered. We examine this in relation to Paechter’s [Paechter, Carrie (2003). Masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. Women’s Studies International Forum 26, 69–77] idea of “communities of practice”, arguing that the presence and meanings of the animal within particular communities – as well as the human practices – together shape how people experience gender. The presence of horses enables a subversion of dominant gender practices particularly at the localized (private) level, while at the same time enables a reinscription of traditional gender ideals at the global (public) level.

Gender is experienced and expressed through the body; but, in human–horse relationships it is also expressed in conjunction with the body and character of the horse. Horses are not mere props, but rather they are companions who have a profound impact on people's lived experience of gender and how it is expressed corporeally. Continuing to explore the multiple ways gender is experienced within the context of human/animal relationships promises to offer greater insight into the complex workings of gender.

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Introduction

Our relationships with nonhuman animals are a crucial, but often overlooked, part of our social life – an omission now increasingly recognized in many disciplines. Scholars in the emerging field of human/animal studies have explored myriad questions relating to our experiences with other animals. Much of this research focuses specifically on people’s lives with dogs and cats, with a few studies addressing other species, such as horses. Little, however, has addressed questions of gender, 3 and how gender is performed in relation to animals (Ramirez, 2006; Lawrence 1985).

Yet not only do humans experience gender in specific ways in their associations with some animals, but the animals themselves become gendered through the interaction. Our purpose in this paper is to explore how two kinds of interaction – of gender and of human/animal – intersect. We explore specifically the relationship between horse and human – a relationship that is partly embodied, through the act of riding (Game, 2001) and which offers several ways in which gender can be produced.

We ask how, for example, does the relationship between horse and human itself produce gender differences? How does gender play out in the figures of horse and rider? We draw here on some examples of different equestrian worlds, focusing in particular on the recent development of what is popularly known as “natural horsemanship” (sic), where the figure of the cowboy predominates, and on the traditional world of “English” traditional riding (where, arguably, the figure of the aristocratic elite predominates). In each, we pay attention not only to how the people disport themselves, but also to how they configure the horse and the horse’s role in their shared pursuit. 2
Most equestrian competitions are, unlike other sports, open to both women and men, usually on equal terms. That superficial equality does not mean, however, that gender is irrelevant to equestrianism: on the contrary, gender differences emerge in multiple ways in horse worlds, from the macho image of the cowboy at the rodeo to the arguably effeminate dressage rider. The performance of gender between humans and in relationship to horses is complex and situated. The type of riding, or discipline, one chooses to engage in, for example, determines how gender is expressed. Though dominant norms of femininity and masculinity are a common thread running through many of the different riding disciplines, it is specific riding communities that govern the ways in which femininities and masculinities are produced locally.

To speak only of gender in relation to people who practice equestrianism, however, is to omit a significant actor. Human relationships with animals—like gender relations—are performed (Birke, Lykke & Bryld, 2004; Despret, 2004); thus, what differentiates this gendered world from many others is the participation of the horse. The performance of gender in equestrian communities is multilayered and cannot be understood in isolation. The presence of the horse and how humans configure the horse in each specific community must also be considered to understand how gender operates within the context of human/animal relationships.

We draw partly on our own experiences of growing up with horses in different parts of the world, in which the meaning of horses differs according to landscapes and social/cultural histories. We also draw on our previous studies of the worlds of people and horses in the U.S. and the U.K (Brandt, 2005; Birke, 2007). The performance of gender; of femininities and masculinities, takes different forms in different “horsey” worlds—providing examples of what Carrie Paechter (2003, 2006) calls “communities of practice” in which people learn and express themselves in relation to horses. Paechter emphasises that gender is relational, developing through participation in particular communities. Her focus is how children participate in shifting communities, enacting gender in differing ways at different stages. Masculinities and femininities are thus, she argues, local accomplishments, forged within specific communities and practices, but which link with other sets of practices, including those of the adult world.

Here, however, we are talking about communities centred on a specific human–animal relationship. So, while we begin by considering gender in relation to horse people, we also discuss how horses too are (constructed as) gendered. What is central to how gender is performed in equestrian worlds is that it is enacted through the figure and body of the horse. The communities of practice here must necessarily include the actions of—as well as human beliefs about—the horse. But what we want to emphasize is that horse and rider are closely interlinked; each becomes an embodiment of the other. This, we will argue, means that gender in such relationships is ultimately a conjoint production, an accomplishment of both horse and human.

**Gender and horsepeople**

However, much women have had, throughout history, rich and complex relationships with horses, male figures have predominated in the way Western culture represents equines, no matter the riding discipline. From the mythology of the centaur (most commonly depicting a male human torso), to the mounted Medieval knight or cavalry charger, to the cowboy of the American west and the North American Indian buffalo hunter, images of horse people are loaded with meanings about gender. Furthermore, these images are also overlaid with ideologies of race and empire, through the role of horses in vanquishing other peoples and territories. “England’s past has been borne upon his back; all our history is his industry” states a eulogy to the horse which is read aloud every year at Britain’s Horse of the Year Show (Duncan, 1994)—reminding us of that entanglement of horses with human (military) history (as well as assumptions about horses’ gender). Equine blood runs in rivers through Britain’s past—not to mention human history more generally.

Despite the military associations, horses were long used for transport—for men and women alike. Yet women’s experiences, stories, and knowledge of horses remain largely unknown, despite the massive number of women who ride or have ridden in the past. Until the twentieth century, representations of women with horses were few (and those almost invariably depicted aristocratic women, riding spirited horses). Myths about women’s relationships with horses, however, are plentiful. On a cultural level, women’s relationships with horses are often submerged within the language of “misplacement”, centered on unfulfilled human desires, such as a desire for a man, or for a child. In her book Dark Horses and Black Beauties, Melissa Holbrook Pierson (2002) writes about this cultural mythology and distortion of woman–horse relationships as non-authentic. “They are seen as deficient substitutes for human relationships” she writes, “signs that one would have really preferred companionship or parenthood of one’s own kind but for some faulty function in the psyche’s wiring” (Pierson, 2000: 88).

Although horsewomen are likely to snort with derision at the tale of “misplaced desire”, they are also likely to agree that being around horses often allows girls freedoms that they might otherwise be denied. For many girls growing up around horses, riding provides opportunities to challenge conventional concepts of femininity: messing around with horses allows them to be tomboys, and to develop self-esteem and confidence (Traenæ & Wang, 2006). That, indeed, was a central part of growing up for both of us, even though in different parts of the world. Spending the day with horses, usually covered in muck, was far preferable to the primping and preening that seemed to be required to produce girls. This sentiment is captured on a popular young girl’s tee shirt in the U.S. that in bold print reads, “here’s one little girl who would rather wear chaps than a party dress.”

Maybe, but she will grow up with many challenges. Images of feminized horsewomen abound in equestrian magazines. In advertising, the tomboy with hay in her hair and muck on her hands simply does not exist. Riding wear is modeled in magazine advertising by attractive young women, often ones well known for their successes in competition, and almost always white. In turn, heterosexual assumptions in images and text tend to figure the horse as male. One ad for an equine de-worming product portrays a beautifully coiffed, traditionally feminine woman who stands with both her arms across her horse’s back; the text reads, “Left brain: Because it’s approved to control more species and stages of parasites than
any other brand. Right brain: Because you’re in love” (Equus 2006 (349): 58). No matter the actual gender of this horse, there is an implicit message here that is heterosexual and normative, for both woman and horse.

For whatever reasons, girls and women predominate – at least at the amateur levels – in most areas of equestrianism, whether that be leisure horses, dressage, or eventing. Men, however, outnumber women at the “professional” end of these sports; where women predominate are, significantly, what might be called the craft labour areas of equestrianism – the least industrialized. By contrast, in areas like racing, where large sums of money are at stake, horse keeping becomes much more of a process of production – and women are relatively fewer, especially at the top. Women might be found on the yards, caring for these elite animals – and are, significantly, still called “lads” (Cassidy, 2002; also see Larsen, 2006).

It is not, however, so much the sheer numbers of women in popular equestrian activities that we want to focus on here, but rather, how gender is performed in particular contexts. The two horse cultures we explore – “natural horsemanship” and “traditional” – are both relatively amateur, and associated with leisure riding (as contrasted with the world of professional racing). Exponents of “natural horsemanship” (hereafter NH) see themselves as, among other things, different from those in the traditional world, and they police the boundaries of behaviour and beliefs accordingly (Birke, 2007).

That very phrase “horsemanship” is, of course, the first clue that equestrian worlds are gendered. We use it here (and with a sense of the irony) largely because it is in such widespread use. The term refers to the high levels of skills required to know and manage horses – something which has been culturally associated with male gender. Years ago, people would talk about the knowledge of the “old horsemen”, to whom one might turn for advice. And, in NH worlds particularly, “horsemanship” is usually just that: most of the leading practitioners/teachers are men. Here, however, our concern is not only with the terms but also with how gender is enacted in these two communities. People and horses in traditional worlds

Both of us grew up in what we characterize as “traditional” equestrian worlds, centered around Pony Club, learning to ride in competitions, learning how to just be around horses in the barn or yard. Such routes into horses are typically rural, and often (in Britain and some parts of the U.S., particularly) linked to ridden hunting. Young girls with a passion for ponies spend many hours hanging around the yard, mucking out or helping out, anything just to be near horses.

Apart from learning about the animals, and riding them, however, girls are being enculturated into a particular community. In a study of how social relations are ordered in the “New Countryside” in Britain, Latimer (Latimer, 2007; Latimer & Birke, 2009) notes how attachments to horses help to accomplish social order, as rural social lives can often revolve around horse-related activities. This is what she calls the “Anglo-Irish” horse world, firmly rooted in established rural communities. A meet of the mounted hunt in an English village, for example, forms a set of “practical activities that performs a sense of a solid community, of a people who know how to handle themselves and nature, who know their place in a prefigured order” (Latimer, 2007).

That prefigured order of the traditional horse world is rooted in social class, which in turn crosscuts gender. Historically, in Britain hunting with hounds has long been practiced: but it took on a new dimension with the enclosure of large tracts of land into fields (especially in the 18th century). To follow hounds on horseback now required a horse capable of both running fast and of jumping substantial obstacles; importantly, it did not require (as had the manege training emphasised by the aristocracy in previous eras) lengthy and expensive training – so opening up the hunting field to a wider, even middle class, participation – and encouraging more women (Mason, 2000).

This was a significant change, and entailed altering how people sat on horses (the “forward seat” is better suited for fast riding across country, though this was not adopted by significant numbers of women until well into the twentieth century). Landry (2005) has noted that these new developments became associated with ideas of liberty – and even nationalism (becoming linked to ideas of the freeborn Briton). She notes, further, how artistic representations of the upper class on horses in the Eighteenth century tended to emphasise partnership with the horse rather than the domination implied by paintings of haute école popular in France and Italy. It was, moreover, a partnership with intelligent, sensitive, “blood” horses, who would not be bullied into submission. That heritage remains today – being able to manage highly strung horses is part of traditional horsey culture, and is highly valued: it is part of the tacit knowledge horsey people are assumed to “grow up with” in these traditional rural communities (Latimer, 2007). It characterizes mainstream horsey culture in the U.K., as well as in the United States (where it is typically called “English” riding).

Women working with horses must be tough, capable, and not mind getting dirty: children falling off their ponies at Pony Club camps were routinely admonished to “stop crying and get back on the pony!” In this world, women may have to drive large trucks, lift heavy hay bales, carry heavy water buckets, not to mention handle large and sometimes badly behaved horses. Horsewomen spend a great deal of time labouring outside in the wind and the sun. Their faces are weathered and hands calloused, their clothes are worn and dirty, and they are far from the ideals of feminine style.

Yet once they and their horses leave the barn or yard, especially to engage in communities of hunting or competition, then markers of gender assume more importance. Perhaps partly this reflects the gendered history of most forms of competitive riding: dressage, for example, originated in the haute école of classical horsemanship – practised almost entirely by men as a means of producing and maintaining highly obedient mounts for the battlefield. But, in more recent times, it has become more and more taken up by women and is generally seen as a feminine pursuit by other horsepeople. Hence, the popularizing of the term “dressage queen” in the U.S., which refers to a “prissy” female dressage rider (and occasionally gay male rider) who is seen as obsessed with complete perfection (of the sport) by both person and horse.
Gender in public equestrian spaces is performed through dress. Superficially, riding attire seems to differ little, but people find other ways to mark gender. Thus, while short hair may be practical on the yard, in the dressage arena, it is often supplemented by a false “bun” to suggest long hair. Tomboys suddenly start wearing ribbons when astride a show pony. Flashy belts, colourful shirts and brightly coloured strips on the helmet similarly are used to connote femininity in different parts of equestrian competition. Even astride the horse, when gender is not always easily identifiable, added colours can act as a marker. Performance in the show ring is thus not only a question of the competition – ability to jump or to carry out refined dressage movements, for example: it is also an enactment of belonging to particular communities and of ways of being within those communities. In competitions where riders (not horses) are specifically judged on their form and style, the top winners are almost always tall, long-legged, and thin girls and women. Judges routinely reward a stereotypically valued feminine corporeality as being the most elegant, the most stylish, even when others in the competition may in fact be better riders. Markers of femininity may be irrelevant when wielding a pitchfork, but they assume greater significance within the public and visible domain of the show ring. Thus, gender divisions, while less relevant in the barn, must be worked at – laboured – in the public domain (Latimer & Birke, 2009). Performance on horses, moreover, is what partly defines the traditional world: children are expected to “progress” through grades of the Pony Club, they learn to value spirited, athletic horses who can perform well in the hunting field or in the competition arena. In turn, participation in these activities helps to produce a sense of belonging to particular rural communities (Latimer & Birke, 2009). In many ways, the horse and its specific abilities helps humans to shape their identities as horsepeople. But it is also this sense of a horsey community tied tightly into specific ways of rural life, into structures and competitions, that some horse owners find alienating. Not surprisingly, they then seek alternatives, other social worlds to define and contain their relationships with horses. One such is the newly emerging world of NH, a cultural change offering a challenge to many entrenched values of the horse world.

NH – the iconography of the cowboy

“Natural horsemanship” (NH) is the generic name commonly given to what has been dubbed a “revolution in horsemanship” (Miller & Lamb, 2005), dedicated to a rejection of what are seen as old, harsh, ways of interacting with horses and celebrating more caring ways. This has been taking off in both North America and Europe, its success fuelled by novels like Nicholas Evans’ The Horse Whisperer (and the subsequent film of the same name). At the forefront of this sea change is an image of the old West, radically revised to include an ethic of caring.

Central to that image of the old West is, of course, the masculine image of the cowboy. Within NH, men predominate as leaders, typically dressed as cowboys, and making millions of dollars from books and other materials. Indeed, the use of the cowboy image has probably been a key element in these men’s success, conveying an image of macho toughness, quintessential masculinity (Brandt, 2005). Yet among people taking up these methods,10 women vastly outnumber men. Typically, when one of the leaders advertises a clinic, he demonstrates what wonderful things can be done with an otherwise difficult horse, to a fascinated and doting, largely female, audience.

Not only has NH been highly successful, and well marketed, but its followers often speak evangelically of their new-found methods: one respondent in our research studies explained that “There is not a single word to describe it, it’s awesome, enlightening, emotional, it’s truly exciting and wonderful!” (interview: cited in Birke, 2007, p.222).11 What is at stake here, however, is not only a zeal for what enthusiasts consider to be gentle, horse-friendly methods of handling, but also a complete rejection of previous, traditional, ways of interacting with horses. These, advocates insist, reflect a failure truly to understand the horse from the horse’s point of view.

Yet in the iconography of the mythic Old West, cowboys were “masters” of animals and the land. Within the NH movement, like the story of the West’s uncharted territory, natural horsemanship is presented as “new” undiscovered ideas (while the practices of American Indians, the Mexican Vaqueros, and women are eerily absent). In her book Cowgirls, author Teresa Jordon (1982) questions why ranching women and their stories seem to disappear: “While the cowboy is our favorite American hero,” she writes, “the cowboy’s female counterpart – who can ride and rope and wrangle, who understands land and stock and confronts the elements on a daily basis – is somehow missing from our folklore” (Jordon, 1982, p. xxx).

Not only does NH draw on a figure immersed in associations with masculinity, but it simultaneously emphasizes traditionally feminine values – of gentleness and caring. These, however, pose little threat to masculinity precisely because they are wrapped up (both literally and figuratively) in the figure of the cowboy. The horse whisperer, the gentle cowboy, thus keeps the masculine, freethinking, rugged individualist alive while retaining an emotional sensitivity and gentleness. NH therefore fits partly with a wider cultural reconstruction of the imagery of cowboys, to include both toughness and gentleness, implied in the use of cowboy images for advertising fashion – and which, in both cases, challenges both gender and heterosexual norms (Swift, 2002).

Cowboys, however, are much less obviously a part of European culture. The top hat, not the stetson could be said to characterize riding traditions in Britain for example. Yet when NH was sold to horse owners in Europe, the cowboy came too, and remains a central figure, bringing with him a romance of deep communion with horses, and with the wide open plains. NH clinics in the U.K. are typically run by white men, often wearing stetsons and cowboy boots, with large jangling spurs, despite the impracticality of such wear in the British context (different weather, different agricultural practices). It is even more incongruous that – at least in our experience – many of the leaders and trainers of NH extend the persona of the cowboy into their everyday life, and are rarely seen not wearing Levis and stetsons. The success of this figure even out-of-context in Europe relies on its power to symbolize both freedom and masculinity. Thus, gendered roles are very
clearly performed in NH worlds, configured around the iconic masculine cowboy as a fount of knowledge and expertise. So, although NH and traditional worlds are broadly similar in terms of who participates (larger numbers of women as students; far more men acting as trainers/leaders), they differ in how gender is configured. In both, it is widely accepted that women can be tough, tomboys. But in traditional equestrian cultures, it is more often femininity that is marked in specific ways, and usually at sites of public display, while in NH worlds, the gendered imagery centres around the highly valent figure of the cowboy. In traditional worlds, too, there is an emphasis on being “tough” when riding (perhaps especially galloping hard across country, as in the mounted hunt), contrasted to the emphasis on gentle partnership apparent in the discourses of NH. Gender – its performance in practice and discourse – emerges in complex and contradictory ways out of engagement with particular social worlds based around horses. It is not, however, only people who participate in equestrian worlds: gender is also performed in relation to the body of the horse, a theme we now consider.

Configuring the horse

That the symbolic power of the horse carries overtones of gender should not be a surprise. We have only to think of the many statues in European cities, depicting some military man astride a spirited horse.12 Usually, it is quite clear that this horse is a stallion, its very maleness befitting the glory of the man above, and the tales of conquest in their combined story. Even without a rider, horse representations are usually male: figure one shows a stylized horse statue outside a hotel in Ballsbridge, Dublin – its gender is in no doubt (Fig. 1).

The maleness of the horse in mounted statues reflects the masculinity of the rider – a link still made in many quarters: Lawrence (1985), for example, discussed the insistence by U.S mounted police that their mounts be geldings, concluding that “To the men, riding a mare for their job is unthinkable” (Lawrence, 1985, p. 139). Yet there is ambiguity in the way we imagine horses, for at the same time as they symbolize great feats of conquest, those feats depend upon the horse becoming tamed, its wildness contained by domestication – and so implicitly feminized.

In this section, we focus on how gender plays out in the way that horses are characterized – not only through their gendered bodies, but also in the expectations we have of their behaviour. Horses and their bodies become highly socially differentiated cultural artifacts, bearing layers of (often ambiguous and contradictory) meaning and symbolism. Traditional Anglo–Irish horse cultures, for example, are profoundly embedded in social class, and “pedigree” (see also Cassidy, 2002). Thus, there is considerable emphasis on “breed”, with all the social differentiation (both equine and human) that implies.13

The emphasis on breeding is not only, however, about inherent qualities, but also about how “breed” is performed and nurtured. “Good” horses are not simply born that way – they have to be trained and educated for the qualities to be shown (Latimer and Birke, 2009). In principle, a “good” horse could be of either sex – after all, the training and education methods should be generalisable. In practice, however, there remains considerable prejudice against mares within many parts of the horse world: mares are widely thought to be fickle and unpredictable, while males – at least castrated males – are thought to be more reliable. “Is your mare moody?” asks an advertisement that ran for a while in British horse magazines, over an image of a mare with her ears back, indicating temper, and sporting devils horns. If she takes the product offered, however, she will become the other image – the mare with ears willingly forward and pointing upward to the halo she wears. Horses, like women, can be both madonna and whore, it seems.

Within this discourse, breeding is paramount: advertisements for horses for sale conventionally tell you the age, sex and breeding of the horse, especially if the horse is to be used in competitive disciplines. Breeding, too, is a domain of masculine supremacy, in which stallions’ names are pre-eminent. If mares are mentioned, it is often to say precisely who their father was – patrilineal descents matter. Cassidy (2002), in her study of the thoroughbred racing industry centred on Newmarket in England, notes how – even when breeders and trainers make reference to the dam of a foal – it is the stallion who is “seen as contributing those mystical qualities that affect racing ability: ‘presence’, ‘courage’, or ‘heart’. The mare’s contributions are either temperamental or mundane” (Cassidy, 2002, p.165). Similarly, stallions and mares are supposed to look the gendered – and heterosexual – part: Warren (2003), writing about how we read gender and sexuality onto horses, quotes standards for two breeds: “Hanoverian stallions...must have a distinctly masculine bearing and mares a distinctly feminine expression” [while] Percheron ‘Stallions should have a bold masculine head while mares have a more refined, feminine head.’” (Warren, 2003). Quite what constitutes a feminine expression in a heavy horse such as a Percheron (a French type bred for farm work and pulling ploughs) is anyone’s guess.

In traditional worlds the nature of specific breeds may be discussed, though there is little overt discussion of the horse as species. Rather, the focus is on breeding, training history, and competitive accomplishments. It is not uncommon for a horse on the competition circuit to change hands of ownership several times over her or his lifetime. Though the horse is a partner, she/he is a partner with a purpose to take the rider to the winner’s circle (which bolsters the human’s status). By contrast, in the world of NH, breeding and gender matter
much less: any horse could in theory be trained with NH methods, while the discourse focuses on training rather than the suitability of the horse. The emphasis in NH is not on the winner’s circle, but rather a deep, long lasting interspecies connection achievable through communication.

One significant difference between the two discourses is that NH relies on a quasi-scientific language, referring frequently to the “ethology” of horses, the need to understand their natural behaviour and how they learn. Advocates put particular emphasis on horses as prey animals: you must understand that they are prey, and think of you as a potential predator, informants assured us. As a result of learning about this while studying NH techniques, some spoke of the revelation that the horse might perceive the rider “as a tiger about to leap on its back” (Birke, 2008, p 111).

This prey/predator dichotomy is central to NH discourse and is one of the first points explained to someone new to the philosophy. Here, the horse is defined as a prey animal with “flight” (not fight) instincts whose most basic need is self-preservation. That is, if a horse feels that something or someone is a threat to their survival or well being, their flight response will be triggered and they will quickly move away from whatever it is that feels threatening. Humans, on the other hand, are categorized as predators. This point is important, because the first step in the process of learning NH techniques is to understand the horse’s psyche as a prey animal and realize that the horse initially sees the human as a threat to survival. The goal then of NH is that by way of learned training techniques, both prey animal and predator can share a meaningful relationship. While people from traditional backgrounds might also acknowledge the strength of horses’ flight responses, they seldom emphasize the horse as a prey animal, or explicitly refer to ethology.

Analysing narratives used in ethological descriptions, Crist (1999) points out the contrast between the language of natural history, which posits the animals as subjects, aware of their world, and that in scientific ethology, which tends to position the animal as an object, as passive. There is thus a tension in NH discourse, between the scientific language, in which the horse may become an abstract and objectified “other”, and talk of “partnership” with a named individual, possessing subjectivity (Birke, 2008). Drawing on narratives of ethology to explain horse behaviour is inevitably to use a language which renders the horse acted-upon – whether that is by external stimuli or inherent instincts, or via human action. As Noske (2005) points out, the use of such language in scientific accounts of horse training not only ignores horses as subjects, but also creates a knowledge based on domination.

The prey/predator binary, combined with that language of domination, reinscribes gender powerfully. Tales of predation, laden with sexual references, run through narratives of hunting with guns, as Kheel (1995) points out: throughout Western culture, predators are historically figured as men/masculine, while prey are figured as female/feminine. Hunting, furthermore, has been associated with a masculine moral virtue (McKenzie, 2005), as well as heterosexual, even eroticised, passion (Luke, 1998; Kheel, 2008). Thus, writing about Medieval imagery of eroticism through hunting, Kheel (2008, p. 75) suggests, “The erotic drive was conceived as a longing that takes possession of the pursuer, transforming him into the prey of his own desire”. This connection survives, she argues, in the ethos of modern rifle hunting and wilderness forays, where the masculine gaze looks with desire on the rest of nature. The endpoint in hunting and in animal training is, of course, different – trainers do not usually seek the death of the animal in the encounter – but both rely on figuring the predator as active, seeking out the prey, manipulating its behaviour. And both rely on particularly passionate rhetoric.

What happens, then, when a predator/prey binary is used in NH? When students of NH methods are encouraged to think about equine ethology, they are reminded that horses are, in nature, prey animals who might perceive humans as “about to leap on their backs”. But, after recognizing this, students are asked “don’t think like a predator”, to learn to prove to the horse that “you are not a predator in your thoughts and emotions as well as your actions” (Martignier, 2006, pp 8/9). One NH student explained that she was “becoming a better person, learning not to think like a predator [...]learning to be] polite to the horse”, whereas previously she had been hard on the horse because she “thought like a predator” [Kelly, interview Birke: unpublished].

Horses, as potential prey, then become figured at least partly as feminine, as needing help to think through their emotional flight response. Moreover, NH advocates speak passionately of the need to learn to “speak horse” – hinting at a desire to transform oneself into horse just as hunters perceive prey. In this way, horses and women are figured similarly – the horse is at the mercy of its own instincts, its essential nature, and the human can help the horse override its instincts so that the two can participate in a goal-oriented relationship. Figuring the horse as in some senses feminine (however indirect this attribution is) provides fertile ground for the predominance of male clinicians in NH. At the same time as they draw on ethological concepts, however, they eschew the position of predator: practitioners are taught not to think like one. In that sense, learning to figure the horse in particular ways is central to becoming part of the NH community. At the heart of this community is the cowboy who, while appearing gentle and caring, is still a commander of the “beast.”; the horse in turn remains feminized through the mutually supportive discourses of predators/prey, and wild/tame, while women practitioners remain effectively marginalized.

Horses, nevertheless, can also resist. Whatever else their education is intended to convey, it provides them with opportunities to learn how their wildness can be expressed in ways acceptable to people. That is the basis of, for example, the “controlled wildness” of racing, or jumping across country. Horses might also learn that a certain amount of leaping around is accepted by people – allowing horses to “let off steam” at the end of a lunge-line (a long rope) is common equestrian practice, for instance. In such ways horses themselves become active participants in what Despret (2004) calls “anthropo-zoo-genetic practice” – the way that horse and human attune to each other to create a “becoming with” – the ultimate goal of almost all horse riders.

**Mutual practices: engendering horse worlds**

Horses can thus be said to help create individual horse/human relationships: in horsey worlds, they are crucially part of what Carrie Paechter calls “communities of practice”
(Paechter, 2003, 2006). She discusses such communities in relation to how gender is performed, a theme we now take up. But we must emphasize that, whatever form human performances of gender takes, horses are also part of those communities: they are not simply inanimate objects around which community identities are forged.

Paechter builds on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice through which learning takes place, and extends it to thinking about the performativity of masculinities and femininities within such groupings. By focusing on localized communities, she argues, we might move away from monolithic concepts of femininity and masculinity and develop understanding of how gender is performed in specific, different, contexts. The horseworlds we describe here – traditional and NH – can both be seen in this way: both are relatively local, and entail people developing expertise through day to day engagement with the practices of the community. Paechter (2003) notes that communities of practice often involve establishing boundaries, markers of membership and processes of apprenticeship. Similarly, as NH has emerged, there has been a growing policing of boundaries between enthusiasts and traditionalists (Birke, 2007). Both communities entail forms of apprenticeship, though in somewhat different ways. In traditional worlds, riding and horses are crucially part of the way that rural community is performed, and in which children are socialized (Latimer, 2007), while in NH, apprenticeship tends to take the form of horse owners attending clinics run by “experts”. “Belonging” in these communities thus often means following one or other forms of expertise. But, because NH is relatively new, apprenticeship has to be actively worked at; membership is something to be accomplished rather than taken for granted.

Gender is more ambiguous, however (Paechter, 2003). In horseworlds, the acceptable masculinity of the tomboy in the stable yard becomes a marker which defines “horsey people” against the outside world (sometimes derogatorily). But it is when these localized communities come up against outsiders – in, for example, the public display of the hunting field or the horse show– that specific markers of gender are brought into play. As Paechter (2003, p. 73) points out, understanding the localized nature of the performance of gender must be understood in “relationship to wider communities and social structures”. This is an instance of how gender can operate with fluid boundaries such that people can inhabit different gendered spaces at different times: masculinities and femininities are not something we pick up arbitrarily, argues Paechter (2006), but are specific to context, constrained by the communities in which they are enacted.

In the examples used here, both the operation of gender and the operation of the relationship with the horse are subject to scrutiny, to the maintenance of localized networks of power, such that participation in the community is policed – explicitly so in relation to horses, as exclusion from one or the other community is frequently debated in terms of “what is good for the horse”. But in the wider culture, it is knowledge coded as masculine which is accorded more power, given more status: “there has been a tendency in the West since the Enlightenment to valorize decontextualized and disembodied knowledge as masculine. This has meant that hegemonic masculinities have been connected particularly closely with disembodied knowledge”, suggests Paechter (2006:22).

Arguably, “horsemanship” (of whatever kind) falls into that category. It is both an ultimate goal of horse people and a nebulous term describing an unattainable ideal. Despite the numbers of women engaging in equestrian pursuits, “horsemanship” remains the ideal in all horse worlds – and it is a gendered term, connoting some kind of rarified understanding possessed in folk memory by “the old horsemen”. Indeed, two brothers, Tom and Bill Dorrance, are widely credited as the “fathers” of NH. It is precisely that sense of some special knowledge possessed only by a few that the popularisers of NH have drawn on; thus, it is a predominantly masculine knowledge which also permits the ongoing performance of masculinity in the bodily form of the cowboy. It is perhaps not accidental that the men who run many NH clinics take on this persona not only at the clinic, but also in their everyday life. This extension of the gendered self thus permits an expression of masculinity that may be felt as lacking in traditional horseworlds.

Communities of NH advocates draw on discourses of caring and communicating – stereotypically feminine values. But, as we have noted, most of the clinicians are men. Indeed, the divisions between (largely female) followers and (largely male) clinicians seems to reinscribe gender more strongly – especially through the ever-present trope of the cowboy. The horsewomen’s consumption of the cowboy and his methods situate them decidedly within a heteronormative, traditionally gendered framework. In that sense, the processes of knowledge dissemination – through clinics and debt marketing of products – become a significantly gendered part of this specific community of practice.

Paechter’s analysis moves consideration of how gender is performed away from generalized femininities and masculinities and toward an understanding of how these are lived through engagement in specific communities. The two horsey worlds we discuss here are examples: they both entail specific communities of practice into which people must progress. But they also include another crucial element – the horse. Part of educating a horse before it can be ridden means that the horse learns, through its body, how humans communicate bodily. So, too, does the rider learn about the bodily movements of the horse (Game, 2001; Brandt, 2004; Despret, 2004). Thus, engagement in these communities entails a specific form of mutual corporeality.

It is just that embodiment with the horse that permits and encourages certain ways of performing gender. For the powerful body of a horse – a big, potentially dangerous animal – requires the human to take on specific ways of being around horses (often requiring physical strength); in that sense, the combined embodiment of horse and rider resonates with masculinity. That is why “feminine” behaviour is generally derided in the stable yard, whether one is riding or working with a horse from the ground.

Yet it is not only a question of simply performing through one’s own body (wielding the pitchfork, for instance), but is also how that embodiment is extended through embodiment with the horse. Gender is performative, as Butler (1990) noted; such performativity is deeply corporeal, not only in the sense that bodies act in gendered ways, but also in the sense that performing gender creates bodily states which facilitate other ways of being. In the case of riding, both participants must learn this language until it becomes part of bodily
memory, produced without conscious thought. Horse people often say that successful riding is achieved when both the human and the horse have a “good feel” for each other. Having a good feel means that both are sensing and making sense of each other such that sensation itself becomes an important mode of communication (Brandt, 2006). For each, their mutual performance becomes encoded into nervous and muscular reactions, so that performance and bodily responses become one.

Feminist theorising about the body has not adequately addressed the biology of the body (Birke, 1999; Wilson, 2004) – how the body’s guts, nerves, muscles, organs and so on are implicated in the way(s) we are in the world. Perhaps we might take up Wilson’s call to ask more questions about how the biological body is implicated in how we live by following Ann Game’s (2001) examination of riding; we might turn to the mutual corporeality of person and horse to explore how our engagement with the animal produces a co-embodiment, and how that works through the actual blood and guts of human and equine bodies.

Conclusion

In both communities of practice what riders seek – beyond “horsemanship” – is a oneness with the horse, a kind of fluid intersubjectivity. While in some senses to speak of fluidity seems to draw on traditional ways of thinking about women’s embodiment, the desire to achieve that oneness also enables a transcendence of the constraints implied by learning to perform femininity (Brandt, 2005). Perhaps, as Brandt suggests, learning to communicate bodily with horses permits women to experience their embodiment in more positive ways.

Learning these skills is crucially part of engagement in equestrian communities of practice. Gender performance threads through these practices and discourses: being with horses permits horsewomen to be less constrained by norms of femininity, for example. But here, unlike many of the social worlds in which we perform gender, we engage in a choreography with another – with another who is not human. People and horses create a kind of intimacy when connected through embodiment, an intimacy which is both enacted through, and brings about change in, the body. That intersubjectivity may be narrated or practiced differently by participants in different communities, but all seek that elusive oneness with the horse. And, while we have argued that the embodiment with the horse helps to perform gender in specific ways, it is also an embodiment that could carry a multitude of meanings and fluidities. Indeed, we might even say that the act of riding allows us potentially to transcend – even momentarily – our engagement with merely human modes of conduct. Part of that is the ability to transcend social boundaries – gendered or species divisions, for example. We can dream, not so much of Pegasus, but of becoming Pegasus – and it’s that becoming – with another that all horsey people dream.

Endnotes

1 A few authors have analysed connections between the exploitation of women and animals – for example, Adams (1990), and there are some studies of differences between women and men in interaction with animals (see Herzog, 2007 for review). However, within research focusing on human/animal relationships there is relatively little analysing specifically how gender is produced.

2 We make a distinction between traditional and NH worlds, not least because of the oppositional discourse surrounding the rise of NH. Many people, however, draw on both, or move between them in different circumstances.

3 This spirit is evident in many of the stories told by women about their relationships with horses: see collection in Fook et al., 2004.

4 Linguistically, too, it is hard to avoid referencing the horse as male – see the Duncan poem quoted above. One alternative is to use “it”, but that reduces the animal to the status of an object.

5 KB competes in hunter–jumper classes in the U.S, where horse and rider are judged on both performance and style over a set of jumps (roughly equivalent to “working hunter” shows in Britain). She has also ridden and participated in numerous NH clinics in the American West. KB used to do three-day events, but now concentrates on show jumping in Europe, which is judged on performance (e.g. fences knocked down). That lifelong experience, along with our respective studies of specific horse worlds, forms the basis of this paper. There will be variations in different horse occupations: as one anonymous reviewer noted, endurance (trail) riding might offer some different experiences. The predominance of women in all kinds of amateur/leisure riding remains.

6 The social and political contexts of this are complex – it also reflected a decline in the ancient traditions of deer-hunting in forests, and a move toward hunting less desirable foxes across open country. That it was possible for hunts to go across privately-owned land says much about British hunting and social class. See Griffin, 2007.

7 Some breeds, such as thoroughbreds, are called “blood” horses. This is not accidental: the breeding of the English thoroughbred was profoundly linked to the status of the people who organised the breeding – mostly the aristocracy (Russell, 1986).

8 The cultural history that has linked equestrianism in Britain to the practices of ridden hunting with hounds (including the deep connection to social class) appears also in the US, – especially in Virginia, where hunting with hounds – with all the cultural trappings – is broadly similar to that in Britain.

9 The significance of the colour pink – as associated with stereotypical femininity – has recently been underlined by Katie Price (a.k.a. the model, Jordan) who has been competing in dressage competitions in the UK and began (2009) marketing her own – bright pink – brand of equestrian clothing and horsewear, urging consumers to “put glamour into their riding”. See report at http://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/388/279274.html.

10 While we use the generic terms “NH” here, it does cover several approaches, espoused by different people – who often compete and argue fiercely with each other. What they have in common, however, is a strong sense of opposition to the traditional world, and an equally strong rejection of methods believed to be associated with them. It is this oppositional stance that we build on here, permitting at least some generalisation.

11 This was a qualitative study, based on face-to-face and email interviews with people in the UK who became advocates of “natural horsemanship”. Most (89%) were women (see Birke, 2007; 2008). Brandt’s study (2004), in the US hunter-jumper community, focused on women.

12 There are a few exceptions – the statue of Boudicca of the Iceni (who famously stood up to Roman invaders) in London, depicts her driving her chariot with spirited horses. But these are exceptional, hugely outnumbered by depictions of men astride horses – in most cities of Europe.

13 Borneman (1988) suggested that American horse breeding has centred on breed purity, much more so than breeding in Europe. This in turn connects to prevailing ideas about nationalism and race. American breeding emphasises “heterogeneous and separate but formally ‘equal’ cultural breed standards” (p.46), he argues.

14 Though they are also likely to be embedded in wider networks, nationally and globally – manufacturers of feedstuffs, tack, national or international equestrian organisations, and so on. Here, we emphasise the localness of day to day horse/human worlds.

15 And almost all white. Occasional Native American voices are heard in this discourse, but African American voices are almost entirely absent.

References
