Nikki Savvides

"Loving-knowing" women and horses: Symbolic connections, real life conflicts and "natural horsemanship"

Since the late nineteenth century, female authors have suggested that Western women and horses have an innate connection. Often, the connection is categorized in terms of female "empowerment" and "liberation," with the rise of female equestrianism playing an important role in overcoming women's oppression and status as incomplete "others" in masculinized society. In this paper I analyze the symbolism of woman-horse relations in Western literature and culture. I argue that the symbolic "connection" between women and horses has had important socio-political outcomes in terms of the status of both female and animal others. I also argue that such symbolism does not necessarily translate into real life, in which woman-horse relations often involve elements of danger and conflict. By interpreting and analyzing interviews undertaken with Australian horse-owning women, I show that literary and cultural representations rely on romanticized views of both horses and women that do little to elucidate the complexities of interspecies relations, or to contribute to a practical framework for cooperative training relations between humans and horses. Using the work of feminist theorists concerned with human-animal relations, I argue that understanding other species requires both emotional responses to animals and experience-based knowledge of relating to other species. I also argue that gender-specific ways of relating to horses limit broader engagements with these animals and suggest that all humans, regardless of gender, have the potential to develop cooperative relations with animals through the discipline of training.

Research shows that approximately eighty percent of the riding population in the Western world are female (Birke 221; Burr 1; Pierson 86). This is suggestive of a particular connection between women and horses that has been considered by several scholars. Burr argues that women have a particular affinity for horses, and implies that women are less likely to be aggressive towards these animals than men, ideas similarly expressed by Barclay and Robinson, who view the relationship as unique. However, there is little research that provides evidence to support this idea, with most scholarship relying on women's own idealized interpretations of a perceived "connection" with these animals. Scholarship that links horse riding to embodiment theory, such as that by female theorists Game and Probyn, is also problematic in this sense. Using Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "becoming animal," both authors suggest that human/woman and horse may develop connections through affective bonds. For Probyn, "becoming-horse" operates as "a

strategy for figuring the undoing and the redoing of the lines between and among entities" (62). Embodiment theory is somewhat useful from this perspective, as it allows for an understanding of how relations might be forged across species. However, embodiment theory does not address the real practice of human-animal relations. I support Haraway's criticism of "becoming-animal" being a "sublime" theory based on the idea of "exceptional" individuals, one that appears to ignore the gritty and mundane aspects of human-animal relations (*When Species Meet*, 28). Horse riding is undeniably an embodied activity, but it is one that also requires a great amount of effort, training, and patience, what Hearne calls "the discipline of horsemanship" (135). As such, embodiment theory is limited in its ability to recognize that women might have difficulties in their relations with horses. In this light, it is necessary for research to be undertaken that acknowledges the affective or emotional feelings humans have for horses, while also understanding the complexities and actual processes involved in developing woman-horse connections.

Scholarship that focuses on the connection between women and horses often does so without accounting for the particularly Westernized, middle-class nature of women-horse relations. Horse riding is symptomatic of what Veblen has termed the behavior of the "leisure class," and what Rojek has described as a "status-placing activity" (211). Further, as I will discuss later in the essay, women's involvement in equestrian pursuits has its roots in the British and European suffragette movement and its offshoots in other Western colonies such as Australia. The location of these activities and the distinction of equestrian pursuits from others involving horses in both Western and non-Western countries posits the research as relevant to a specific group of women and to specific cultures. As a middle class Australian woman who rides and trains horses, I am also aware that my subjectivity is influenced by these matters.

Woman-horse relations are borne out of a symbolic woman-animal connection that is located in a dualistic separation of feminized "nature/emotion" from masculinized "science/rationality," part of what Plumwood terms "the interwoven set" that construes "reason and emotion … in terms of radical exclusion" (168). Plumwood views the categorization of what is "merely emotional" as tied to a rationalist understanding that "emotions involve qualities or express needs of the kind shared with animals, and are therefore both inferior and not truly human" (168). She links the dualism inherent in this categorization to "[t]he opposition between care and concern for particular others and generalized moral concern," which she believe "is associated with the opposition between public (masculine) and private (feminine) realms" (Plumwood 171). That women and animals are posited as "inferior" in this sense is symbolic of what Haraway views as a fracturing of women and animals from the "One": the autonomous (masculine) self (*Simians* 154; 177). The dualism is

therefore representative of the exclusion of women and animals from masculinized society. In their shared excluded position at the border of personhood, the status of women and animals might be considered similar, "not because their logic is necessarily similar, but because their history is so" (Midgley 74). For Midgley, such consideration involves the notion of equality, what she terms the "natural need for freedom" that is shared between women and animals (70). Finding such "freedom" can work as a product of woman-animal relations, with the woman-horse connection in particular acting symbolically as a liberating and empowering force from a political, social, and personal perspective.

One of the earliest examples of the woman-horse connection as socio-political symbol appears in Anna Sewell's novel *Black Beauty*. Published in 1877, the novel provides a literary representation of the situation in which women and horses found themselves in the Victorian era. It is semi-autobiographical, being more an expression of female identification with horses than an actual tale of woman-horse relations. It is also told in the first "person": from the perspective of the equine protagonist. Black Beauty describes his life in detail, from his upbringing on a country estate to his slow descent into an overworked, mistreated carthorse. Though he eventually ends up happily retired, his friend, a fiery chestnut mare named Ginger, does not fare so well. She collapses, skinny and ill from years of abuse, whilst pulling a cart on the cold streets of London. Her master continues to beat her as she dies. Black Beauty and Ginger embodied the suffering of many horses in the Victorian era who were "living machines to be bought and sold like commodities, valued only rarely as natural beings" (McShane and Tarr 18). Sewell provides readers with a different view of horses, one which valued them as sentient and as worthy of empathy and compassion. Yet *Black Beauty* was also representative of its author's own suffering. Sewell was restricted from many aspects of society not only because of her gender, but also due to a crippling injury as a teenager that left her an invalid. She also suffered under the "vigilant care of her domineering mother" (Dorré 168), a devout Quaker and moralist (Chitty 110-114), which further limited her involvement with the world outside her home. These conditions fostered a kinship with horses, her "only true form of motility," that weekly drew her carriage from home to church, and those others that she saw treated poorly in the cab ranks and fields in and around London (Chitty 1971). As Dorré suggests, Sewell writes herself-as-horse, enacting "a double displacement of the self in terms of both species and sex ... in order to address issues of physical as well as psychological abjection" (168). In doing so, the novel acts as a "source of empowerment" for Sewell.

Sewell implies a connection between female oppression and animal suffering, one which parallels Midgley's argument for the similarly excluded position of women and animals in masculinized society. So, too, is the suggestion that women and

animals might be liberated through their connection evident in *Black Beauty*. The author was liberated through the horse; so too was the horse liberated through Sewell. The novel was instrumental in the banning of a device known as the "bearing rein" in 1911. The bearing rein restricted the movement of the horse's head, engendering many physical problems, including damage to the horse's windpipe and the significant shortening of its life (Ryder 95). Further parallels between the status of horses and women can be drawn through this element of physical domination for, as Dorré argues, women were similarly restricted and physically harmed through corseting, with both women's and equine "fashions" creating "bodies [that] perform[ed] work in the culture specifically when bound" (158). As a result of these designs, equine and female bodies were made both culturally useful and "safe," women's overflowing flesh, analogous to potential rebellion, was reined in by tight-laced corsetry, just as the horse's wild potential was suppressed by straps of leather pulled tight through rings of steel.

Elements of domination and control restricted individual female and equine bodies during the late nineteenth century throughout Britain and Europe and indeed in colonies such as Australia. However, increasingly, at least for middle and upper class women, horses represented liberation. Women's growing involvement in equestrian sports at this time was a manifestation of the changing status of both women and horses, and women's climb into the saddle was, quite literally, a significant event in feminist terms. Women riders known as "amazons" in England (cf. David) and "*amazons*" or "*écuyères*" in France and throughout Europe (cf. Weil) were persistent reminders of changing attitudes towards women, both in sport and in broader society. Middle and upper class amazons resisted "traditional definitions of femininity" (David 182). Their gender was ambiguous, with the adoption of breeches or trousers worn under riding skirts at the end of the nineteenth century suggesting masculinity "lurking beneath this proper façade" (185). Furthermore, the introduction of "cross saddle" riding attire for women at the turn of the nineteenth century (202) allowed them "not only playfully [to] appropriate elements of masculine costume in the form of the riding habit, but to attain real power and educational autonomy" through their involvement in equestrian sports (197).

For women of this era, equestrian pursuits had the potential to improve their status. Horse riding was:

> transforming and liberating … [offering] … women unprecedented opportunities to free themselves from some of the more entrenched and pervasive tenets of the Victorian ideology of femininity (McCrone 2).

As powerful individuals who could match men in their equestrian prowess, these women further challenged stereotypical gender roles by moving out of the home and into the fields and stables, the traditional realm of men and the working class (Weil 5-6). To use Haraway's term, the transforming and liberating qualities of the amazon's involvement with horses thereby operated as the "Cyborg" product of their connection, the "fusion of non-whole 'Others'" (woman-horse) providing a model for resistance outside of concepts of "wholeness" and "masculine autonomy" (*Simians* 177). By becoming liberated both through and with horses, British and European women engaged with the broader suffragette movement. This involvement eventually expanded to colonies such as Australia.[1]

The connection between Western women with and through horses continues to be represented in contemporary literature, influencing women's ideas about horses from a young age. As Haymonds explains:

> girls in pony books are transformed by their association with ponies into physically adept, brave riders, tackling their own problems, and getting some measure of control in their own lives. In turn, neglected, wild or unmanageable ponies are transformed into sleek, shining horses ... fitting mounts for heroes (51).

Novels such as Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet* and Sharon Wagner's *Gypsy From Nowhere* are among the multitude of stories I devoured as a horse-mad girl. Both novels stress the innateness of the girl/woman-horse connection, a connection that for the female protagonists of the books is dually liberating and empowering. For Bagnold's Velvet, who is "hung up in life," horses engender a transformation into "a wonder, a glory, a miracle child" (Bagnold 208); for Wagner's invalid protagonist Wendy, the horse Gypsy makes her feel "as though the sun was shining inside of her" (Wagner 210). Yet both novels hint that there is more to girl-horse relations than innate, liberating connections. Velvet's horse, The Pie, is wild and unpredictable, though she learns to control him. Wendy has been made invalid from a riding accident in which her horse was killed. The element of danger inherent in their relations contradicts the otherwise harmonious images of girl and horse. These relations are not, in Probyn's words, "a wild running together of horse and girl" (39), nor are they, in Game's, a process of "absorbing horse, taking horse into our body" (9). The concepts of "togetherness" and "absorption" preclude both danger and potential conflict. As a girl caught up in these stories I did not consider, as Hearne describes, the fact that horses "have not by and large read [such stories] ... they know the wrong story, or else they didn't get the chance or refused to read the ending where things come out okay" (126). Believing stories about innate and harmonious connections, and ignoring the danger lurking below the surface, was what led me to

endure broken ribs and multiple concussions after terrifying flights across rough terrain on runaway, uncontrollable horses. Thinking that I had a natural way with horses, like my heroes in pony stories, did not translate into real life. There was more to riding and training horses than love and emotional responses.

Growing into a woman who had learned about the danger inherent in relating to horses, I became surprised at the number of books written by horse-women who continue to believe in an innate connection. Linda Kohanov's *The Tao of Equus*, Betsy Kelleher's *Sometimes a Woman Needs a Horse*, and a recent two-volume essay compilation entitled *Of Women and Horses* (including chapters by horse-women Deborah Day, Kim McElroy, Mary Midkiff, and Cherie King) are, among many others, a reflection of women's relations with horses. These are semi- and autobiographical works, which invariably describe woman-horse relations as based on three specific concepts: "love," "emotions," and "empowerment." For Day, the connection between women and horses "requires an empathy that only a deep and abiding love can create" (47). For Kelleher, horses and women share "a precious bond ... a very real form of love" (20), while for McElroy, horses allow women to "define and expand our awareness of our inner selves" (28). Kohanov describes the horse as an "emotional mirror" (13), helping women deal with their personal issues by allowing them to:

> reach a new state of knowing, a state that integrates feeling, intuition, relationship, and preverbal body wisdom with ... focus, will, inventiveness, and problem solving abilities (95).

Some authors stress that the connection is founded on what they view as specific tenets of femininity. For Midkiff, women have "an innate ability to read emotions," allowing them to have a natural "intuition" with horses (82). Similarly, King believes that the "bond between women and horses may be innate," linking it to women's "nurturing abilities" (142). However, the authors do not provide any in-depth theories as to how such connections play out in day-to-day experiences of riding and training, nor do they discuss or acknowledge the possibilities for the presence of danger and conflict in woman-horse relations. Their idea of an innate connection appears as a romantic ideal that has little grounding in reality, fitting into the genealogy for the symbolic connection between horses and women, but contributing little to any understanding of horse riding and training in practice.

While the symbolic connection between women and horses has evidently meant much for numerous horse-women, the assumption that women are inherently emotional, nurturing beings is problematic. The concept of an innate connection operates within dualistic understandings of both gender and species, positing

women and animals as the "passive, intuitive, emotional, weak and submissive" side of the emotion/rationality dichotomy (Plumwood 103). Gendered assumptions about women and animals also limit any recognition of interspecies relations that are not necessarily harmonious. They wrongly suggest that women can relate to animals without the necessary effort, training, and patience required. In this way, assumptions about an innate woman-horse connection do not contribute to a productive analysis of the complexities of these relations. In undertaking a more productive analysis, the significance of such romanticized feelings about horses should not necessarily be discarded, but should be recognized as only one way of understanding woman-horse relations. Emotional responses to horses, including "love" and "nurturing" are useful ideas if they can be combined with a rationalized perspective based on knowledge and experience, conjoining two sides of otherwise dualistic approaches to human-animal relations. To follow Bulbeck, combining an emotional approach to animals with knowledge gained from experience is the key to enacting what she calls "loving knowing" animals (155-180). Such an approach to human-animal relations requires combining "the affective and intellectual domains" (202). Loving knowing is significant in the context of woman-horse relations, as it might allow women to transcend purely emotional responses to horses and the concept of "innateness," replacing this with an awareness of the need to include experience-based knowledge in their dealings with horses. Further, the concept of incorporating both emotion and experience into training parallels Hearne's argument for cooperative human-animal relations built on "shared commitments and collaboration, on a mutual autonomy" through which "love" is combined with education (52-54).

The Interviews.[2] For the purposes of this research I undertook twenty-two interviews with Australian women aged between 18 and 65, each of whom owned at least one horse. They lived throughout Australia, although most were located in the eastern states. While some women lived on rural properties and cared for their own horses, other women lived in urban areas and had their horses on agistment. The interviews were the result of a particular desire to seek female, Australian horse-owners who had sought to improve their relations with their horses. Inspired by recent research undertaken by Miller and Lamb and Birke, I was interested in investigating the contemporary equestrian "revolution" which has seen an increase in the numbers of riders using non-traditional methods, usually termed "natural horsemanship." According to Birke, in natural horsemanship:

> [t]he emphasis is on kindness, with particular emphasis on communicating with — and learning to understand from the horse's point of view — the natural behavior of horses … natural

> horsemanship methods offer something that will give [riders and trainers] a closer, more trusting, relationship with their horses (218).

Such methods therefore differ from more traditional training methods (such as those involved in dressage and show jumping) by placing less emphasis on competitive success and more on the development of relations between horse and human. The interviews were inspired by my own involvement in the natural horsemanship "movement" in Sydney, Australia. My observation of the large number of women involved in the natural horsemanship workshops I attended on a monthly basis led me to wonder what it was specifically that drew women to natural horsemanship as a training method, and whether it appealed to them more than other methods of training. Having attended the workshops with a horse with which I was having training problems due to numerous psychological and physical issues that caused him to buck, I soon found that many of the women attending the natural horsemanship workshops were also dealing with similar "problems." I grew particularly interested in exploring whether women had found natural horsemanship a successful means to overcome these problems. I hypothesized that improved "connections" with horses might be the reason that women turned to these methods. The interviews certainly highlighted the concept of "connection" with almost all interviewees making reference to either this term or similar ones, including "relationship" and "partnership." Most interviewees mentioned training "problems," with many suggesting that such problems engendered conflict in their relations with their animals. The concept of conflict became of interest to me as I analyzed and interpreted the interviews, since it challenged the notion of a "connection" between women and horses. It also became apparent that women's lived experiences with horses contradicted the romanticized views many held about their abilities and connections with horses.

Rather than providing quantitative material for analysis, the interviews were qualitative and conversational, allowing the interviewees' anecdotes to speak for themselves. Some were undertaken in person, while others were conducted via email or telephone. Formally structured, the questions were always the same and were asked in the same order, but the interviews allowed room for the interviewees' own comments. The interviewees were able to talk as much or as little as they wished about the topic, and most talked at length about their experiences. Analysis was conducted using the coding method proposed by Strauss (1987). Interview transcripts were "fractured" and read in minute detail in order to recognize and interpret categories of similarity. From these I was able to draw specific conclusions, and remained open to the idea that these conclusions would continually change as the analysis progressed and the themes of the interviews became more apparent (Strauss 29). The coding operated within a framework that aimed at viewing how

interviewees' experiences with horses fit into or challenged existing literature on woman-horse relations. Further, the coding was aimed at analyzing how the lived experience of woman-horse relations could be contextualized within the work of the aforementioned feminist theorists, providing an analysis of woman-horse relations from a feminist perspective.

Emotional responses were elicited by all the interviewees, who commonly professed "love" and "passion" for their animals when asked to describe their relations with their horses. Most viewed their horses with familiarity, with some individuals describing horses as their "best friends," "friends and equals rather than subordinates," and "partners." Such expressions appear to be common among Australian horse-owning women; research undertaken by Burr demonstrates that horses fit into "requisite definitions of family" for many, and that their relations are characterized by "co-habitation; mutual intimacy and affection; constancy; participation in family rituals; mutual language and shared activities" (4). For some interviewees, love and familiarity were accompanied by the assertion that the interviewees have a "special way" with the horse. Some were convinced that their gender (femininity specifically) made this possible, paralleling the attitudes represented by the literary texts. As one interviewee stated:

> because I am a woman I have that certain ability to understand and be understood by nature … horses look into a woman's soul and see a kindred spirit.

Another believed that "women have an eternal, 'earth' connection to animals." However, such ideas were revealed as idealistic when both (and many others who expressed similar feelings) acknowledged that conflict existed in their relations with their horses. Many interviewees described "problems" in their relations caused by what were commonly termed either "misunderstandings" or "communication" problems, as one expressed: "[the horse] did not understand what I was saying to him." Communication plays an important role in the training and riding of horses, with body language in particular allowing humans to convey messages to horses and horses to "read" the human's body in semiotic fashion (Brandt 303). Through riding and training, humans and horses "co-create a system of language ... through the medium of the body ... a third language that enables the two to create a world of shared meaning and foster a deeper understanding of each other" (313). For this reason the human trainer or rider "must become comprehensible to the horse, and to be understood is to be open to understanding" (Hearne 107).

The mutuality implied by a co-created language system can be corrupted through misunderstandings between horse and human which may "cause one or the other to

react in a manner that may be harmful to both" (Brandt 309). Such reactions on the part of the horse often manifest themselves in what equine ethologists call "conflict behaviour," including bucking, rearing, bolting, and refusing to.[3] These behaviors are often the cause of injury to riders, and also may cause injury to the horse if the animal is to fall or run into an object at high speed. Other forms of injury to horses may be caused by the rider's response to the conflict behavior. Some interviewees described using punitive measures against the horse in cases of conflict, including whipping the animal. Often, such behavior occurred after the horse had "bucked" or "played up," to use two interviewees' terms. In some cases, punitive responses to horse (mis)behavior followed injury caused to the woman in a riding accident. Almost all interviewees had been involved in such accidents. One interviewee stated that accidents occurred because:

> my relationship with my horse seemed to involve us fighting with one another constantly.

This response demonstrates that misunderstandings between women and horses are potentially injurious to the formation of cooperative relations.

For many interviewees, the romantic ideal of the horse was evidently at odds with the conflict they experienced in real life. As one interviewee expressed:

> [although] I love [my horse] more than anything else in the world ... he is not always easy to get along with … [w]e have a lot of problems with misunderstanding [sic].

Another similarly stated:

> I never seemed to be able to have the sort of relationship I wanted with my horse ... he was always throwing me off and that caused me to be scared about riding.

One even expressed feeling "betrayed" by her horse, a humanized response to conflict behaviors which would seem to stem from the same emotional response to horses that amount to feelings of love and familiarity. Loving horses and being "betrayed" by them seems to make matters worse. As one interviewee explained, she would grow angry and whip her horse for perceived misbehaviors because she would "take things personal [sic]." Statements like these contradict expressions of love and familiarity, highlighting the tension between connections and conflicts between women and horses. They suggest that emotional responses and love are not enough of a foundation for woman-horse relations to be built upon, and that

humanized views of horses do little to contribute to human understandings of these animals.

While seemingly incompatible with the romantic ideal of the unique woman-horse connection, the matter of conflict highlighted the need for the interviewees to improve their relations with their horses. Conflict often provided the impetus for the interviewees to learn new methods of training, and as a result many said that they turned to natural horsemanship to help with training problems. This fit into the observations I had made while attending natural horsemanship workshops. Interviewees expressed interest in natural horsemanship because of its focus on what several interviewees described as "understanding" the horse and "communication"/"communicating with the horse." Other participants hoped natural horsemanship would teach them about "partnership" and to "think more about what the horse experiences in training," thereby demonstrating that they desired greater knowledge about training, and many interviewees expressed that they had gained such knowledge through natural horsemanship. For one interviewee, natural horsemanship helped her overcome training problems by "giving me perspective of how horses learn and feel," which "completely changed my attitudes about training." For others, natural horsemanship similarly taught them that training had "to be negotiated with the horse," and that "horses need input too." For one, training was seen as developing a "conversation" between horse and human. These responses suggested that both reciprocity and cooperation were forged as a result of training and that through natural horsemanship women learned ways to more effectively engender the sort of co-created system of language on which cooperative, mutually communicative relations are founded.

Significantly, many interviewees stressed the hard work involved in training in such a way, with one interviewee describing the process as requiring "absolute devotion." For another, learning natural horsemanship:

> was like learning to ride again in some ways ... I had to reprogram some of the responses to behaviour that I did automatically [and gain] a whole new area of knowledge.

Another further expressed the cooperative nature of natural horsemanship by suggesting that training was a two-way process:

> much of [learning natural horsemanship] meant I seemed to be being trained more than my horse was! ... I was trained to be a better trainer, and as a result I have a better relationship with my horse.

Interestingly, almost all interviewees expressed pleasure at learning how to communicate with and understand their horse, despite the level of work involved. For example, one interviewee stated that:

> [my horse] is more forward, happier and obedient … he no longer sticks his ears back when I put my leg on, he no longer kicks out or bucks when I ask him to go forward … I can fully trust my horse now.

Many also believed that their horses were "happy" as a result of natural horsemanship and that this had strengthened their relations. For instance, as one interviewee explained:

> [my horse is] happy to see me … I know this because he comes towards me when I have the halter or saddle now instead of running away.

The pleasure achieved through cooperation and communication sits in stark contrast to the conflicted relations that the women and horses had previously experienced. The perceived mutuality of pleasure also demonstrates how cooperation in training forges relations in which human and animal might, in Haraway's terms, "discover happiness *together*" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 52 [emphasis mine]). Beyond symbolism, women and horses learning to relate in such a way experience a connection which is not innate, but which is based in the hard work of training. Training in such a way would seem to be the key to forging cooperative connections.

The gendered nature of relations between women and horses would seem to preclude any apparent "connection" between *men* and horses. Yet my experiences, the interviews, and indeed some literature revealed that man-horse connections are significant both within the equestrian world and in the lives of women who train in natural horsemanship. This is because natural horsemanship is predominantly taught by male trainers and riders.[5] For instance, while the workshops I attended were hosted by a female trainer, the trainer had learnt her methods from Pat Parelli, a male trainer based in the USA whose methods are popular throughout the Western world. Parelli sits alongside other influential male trainers such as Monty Roberts, Mark Rodney, Clinton Anderson, and Steve Jeffries in the world of natural horsemanship. There are few women in similar roles worldwide, with notable female trainers such as Julie Goodnight being in the clear minority. Many female trainers are also taught in the methods of trainers such as Parelli.

The predominance of men in dominant positions within the disciplines of natural horsemanship shows a marked disparity between the gendering of horse riding and

training as "female," not only in books but in terms of the numbers of women involved in equestrian disciplines within the Western world. Further, in their roles as "leaders" of both horses and of women, male trainers hold a position in natural horsemanship which is suggestive of confidence in their own abilities to teach and to impart knowledge.[4] This paper does not aim to speculate on the exact role that men play in natural horsemanship. This is an area that warrants further investigation. However, their dominance in these training methods is suggestive of continuing dualistic relations between women and men, and between men, women and horses. Such suggestion is further implied by the obvious gendering of the term "horse*man*ship."

Importantly, the predominance of men as "teachers" of natural horsemanship does not preclude either women's symbolic connection to horses, nor their ability to develop cooperative real-life training relations with these animals. Understanding the specificities of woman-horse relations in practice, as opposed to generalized symbolic connections, shows how humans might question assumptions to forge cooperative and communicative relations based on both loving and knowing horses. In this sense, training is both cross-gendered or gender aspecific, with the relations between human and animal individuals mattering first and foremost.

The significance of woman-horse relations lies within women's identification and emotion for horses as their liberators from oppression. However, the symbolic nature of their connection offers a romanticized perspective on woman-horse relations that does not accurately reflect women's real life experiences. Literary representations of woman-horse relations make broad assumptions about women that suggest that such connections are innate to women, operating as a consequence of women's "emotional" nature. Such assumptions tie in with problematic, longstanding binary understandings of both gender and species that do little to expand our understanding of human-animal relations. Challenges to both gendered assumptions about "love" and "knowledge" provide the potential for developing cooperative connections between women and horses in the face of conflict, an idea examined through the context of interviews undertaken with a number of Australian women who had sought improvements in their relations with horses. The interviews revealed that natural horsemanship helped women to train horses in a way that incorporated both loving knowing horses and a focus on cooperation, an individualized approach to interspecies relations which combines emotional responses with knowledge gained through experience. The paper has also highlighted the fact that connections exist between men and horses, showing that the potential for cooperative relations between horses and humans regardless of gender.

In challenging the assumption that women and horses share an innate connection, the wealth of literature that romanticizes woman-horse relations appears to be less than useful in providing practical information about riding and training. Indeed in many cases, including my own experiences, such literature might be seen to contribute to the appearance of conflict in woman-horse relations by giving women incorrect ideas about horses and their behavior. Nonetheless, such stories endure precisely because they give women an ideal to work towards when they decide to ride and train horses. For this reason, when combined with experience and knowledge, such ideals make an important contribution to our understandings of woman-horse and human-horse relations. In the broader context of human-animal relations, the concepts of loving knowing and cooperating with animals might also hold stead, demonstrating that our emotional responses to animals can be used to forge relations based on knowledge about the particularities of both other species and our own.

Notes

1. See Kay "A Window of Opportunity" (2008) and "It Wasn't Just Emily Davison!" (2010).

2. The interviews were conducted and compiled throughout 2007 and 2008 for my MA Thesis, "Training Companions: Ethical relations between horse and human in the practice of dressage," at the University of Sydney.

3. See McGreevy, et al. "Bolting" is a term used to describe the flight action of a horse which, tuned out to its rider's aids, accelerates into an out-of-control gallop.

4. Men also play a significant role in other equestrian disciplines such as dressage and showjumping, where they are often successful as competitors, and as trainers of both horses and less experienced riders.

5. Part of this confidence is seen in the aggressive marketing employed by many male natural horsemanship trainers. For instance, Pat Parelli's "Parelli Natural Horsemanship" (PNH) requires students to participate in costly programs, to purchase DVDs and PNH-branded training aids in order to complete the courses set by PNH.

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