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Kinship of Different Kinds: Horses and People in Iceland

A person logs in to a database, enters the details of an individual, and is provided with information about their ancestors. In Iceland they may be humans or horses. Through this familiar search function it is possible to access the genealogical records of the entire population of people or horses through two online databases of ancestry and genealogical relatedness. Since 2003 Iceland residents have been able to use *The Book of Icelanders*, a digitized synthesis of archival and published genealogical information, to explore their genealogical relationship to almost any living or deceased Icelander (Pálsson 74). *World Fengur: the Studbook of Origin of the Icelandic Horse*, which was established as an online record of Icelandic horse pedigrees in 2001, similarly digitized existing horse pedigrees and locates newly born horses within these genealogies (Lorange). Both populations, made knowable in new ways through information technologies, are also subject to scientific investigations of their internal genetic variation, their relation to other populations, and thus, of their biohistories of origination (Gudbjartsson et al.; Hreiðarsdóttir; Pálsson).

Yet these databases also reflect older techniques of locating individuals in schemas of genealogical relatedness that predate and inform the genetic and digital: the reckoning, recording, and recounting of pedigree and ancestry, human and animal, and their entanglements in cultural and scientific understandings of difference and distinction in human society (Zerubavel) and the evolutionary relatedness of all life (Strathern). The "facts of kinship" — of who is genealogically related to whom and how — are also mobilized in the enactment of kinship, that is, the making of relations through the exchange of genealogical knowledge and stories of relatedness (Nash, *Of Irish Descent*). This counts for human kinship but, as I explore through the case of horses and people in Iceland, animal pedigrees and stories are often entangled in family histories, as well as national narratives. Understanding kinship in terms of the making of relations as well as genealogical relatedness (Carsten; Edwards; Franklin and McKinnon) also makes it possible to consider the practice of kinship among people *through* horses. The kinships of different kinds that I consider here include human and interspecies kinship, not only in terms of affective closeness and co-presence in human-horse relationships, but also the ways those relationships, as well as the lives of horses, are shaped by human understandings of kinship among horses in Iceland. I explore how human-horse

relationships are shaped by ideas of difference and connection and enacted through spatialities of distance and proximity.

My focus is thus on a specific sort of domesticated non-human animal and a particular place in which human-horse relations are part of national heritage, public culture, and the everyday lives of those who engage with horses directly as breeders, trainers, farmers, horse tour guides, and competition and leisure riders (Björnsson and Sveinsson). The high numbers of horses per person in Iceland in comparison to other European countries reflects their significance as a national breed and as working animals in sheep farming and horse riding tourism, and the popularity of competitive and leisure riding.[1] Though a distinction could be made between those who own a horse, or more usually several horses to ride for leisure, and those who are involved in commercial horse breeding and the highest level of competitive riding, the nature of involvement is more variegated and overlapping. Many people involved with horses combine working and leisure riding; many leisure riders also compete at some level. Horse riding is also not an exclusively elite pursuit. High level competition riding is an expensive pursuit, but the costs of owning "riding horses" rather than "competition horses" do not limit riding to the very wealthy, especially in rural Iceland where access to pasturage is relatively easy, and since horses are still used in sheep farming.[2] My inevitably partial understanding of horse culture in Iceland, as a cultural and linguistic outsider, is based on qualitative interviewing and observational and participatory research, and draws on documentary, online and media sources.[3] My engagement with this material is framed by a conceptual focus on kinship of different kinds, which I set out next before considering the kinships of people and horses in Iceland.

Kin and Kind. To describe human relations with non-human animals in terms of kinship, as Donna Haraway has most notably done, is to challenge human exceptionalism, "the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies" (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 11; see also Fuentes; Fuentes and Porter). Interspecies kinship profoundly undoes a species-exclusive model of kinship. Relationships that matter are not limited to humankind. But its power lies not in evoking a world in which all living things are deeply entangled, important though that recognition is, or in expanding the term to name any sort of relation as kin and thus evoking a generalized "undifferentiated universal relatedness" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 217), but in attending to the specificity of historically and spatially situated interspecies relations. Conceptualizing interspecies kinship in terms of "relationships-in-progress" (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 134) and "becoming with" non-human kin

displaces genealogical models of kinship within and between species, thus extending feminist denaturalizations of kinship as biological relatedness.

The conceptual value of interspecies kinship lies in its power to evoke ideas of meaningful and significant connection, affinity, and relation, and to put them to work to describe human relationships with non-human animals. This power is deployed within the shifting and contingent ways that domestic companion animals are understood as family members in Euro-American contexts (Blouin, *Are Dogs Children?*; Blouin, *Understanding Relations;* Charles, *Post-Human Families?*; Charles and Davis; Fox; Greenebaum; Irvine and Cilia; Power; Shir-Vertesh). Domestic pets are widely described as part of the family, and terms such as child, sometimes sibling, and also baby are frequently used to designate the animal's place within family relations. Though this is often judged to be an infantilizing anthropomorphism, it is most likely that in most cases those who use these terms do so in order to express the depth of the relationship through the familial idiom at their disposal, rather than actually think of their pets as human. Yet some studies of domestic companion animals that track their positioning on a continuum from animal to human, as if this were simultaneously a continuum between object and subject status (Shir-Vertesh) and as if these characterizations (and their contingent withdrawal) imply the overcoming or reinforcing of the "species barrier." There is a tendency to interpret these designations as indicative of people locating their pet towards the human end of a spectrum between humanity and animality, rather than appreciating the ways in which people interpret, experience, and express their sense of the complex similarities and differences between human and interspecies kin. Interspecies kinship does not depend on giving a pet a designated place in a kinship structure, nor does the personhood that is accorded to companion animals (and contingently withdrawn) necessarily signify a humanizing move. Similarly common interpretations of domestic companion animals as substitutes for human family members — especially children — imply that kinship can only really be human (Charles, *Animals* 4). There have been moves to address the family more critically in studies of domestic companion animals (Charles, *Post-Human Families?*; Irvine and Cilia). However, the familial is better encompassed within a broader focus on kinship than conceptually centered, since the concept of kinship is more effective in addressing the complex configurations of connection and difference.

For Haraway, it is the "play between kin and kind" in the term kinship that is "essential to the figure of companion species," between kinship as affinity and connection and kind as a category of difference, such as type or species (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 134). "Family," she argues cannot do the work of kin and its routes/roots to kind

(Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 216). Difference is integral to "kind," but kin-making among people and with other animals is also a matter of differentiations and exclusions. This is both in terms of conventional biological, genetic, genealogical, and species-based models of relatedness, and in terms of the practice of kinship. It is this sense of kinship as a practice of making relations with "significant others" — whose specificity is bound to processes of exclusion and inclusion, connection and differentiation — that means it can productively challenge genealogical models of kin within and between species. It also avoids the analytical bluntness of kinship as a description of any kind of relation.

Kinship suggests affinities, fellow feeling, and connections, but for Haraway and those inspired by her work its radical challenge to the absolute difference between humans and other animals does not mean the elision of difference. For Radhika Govindrajan "interspecies relationality, entanglement, and involvement do not erode difference but emerge from a recognition of it" (145). She argues powerfully for understanding nonhuman animals as "empathetic, intentional, interpretative, and intelligent beings" (22) but insists that this extension of subjectivity and attention to interspecies relatedness "does not overcome or erase ontological differences between human and nonhuman animals" (25). Relatedness, she insists:

> must always be understood as constituting a partial connection between beings who come to their relationship as unpredictable, unknowable, and unequal entities. […] the proclivities, emotions, and desires of different animals are dissimilar and can never be fully reconciled even as they are constituted relationally.

Difference has to be "constantly and imperfectly negotiated through shifting turns to love, care, neglect, avoidance and violence." So while interspecies kinship foregrounds the affective depth of particular human-animal relationships, it does not imply the extension of idealized familial relations to human relations with some animals. As with human kinship, interspecies kinship is a matter of domination, inequality, and hierarchy as much as care, affection, and connection, and is always inflected by human power over nonhuman animals.

Drawing on this work, my approach to kinship has three distinctive strands. Firstly, I consider the practice of human kinship not only with but also *through* horses. In contrast to work on domestic companion animals, there has been less attention to the making of human kin through horses. This may reflect the emphasis in recent explorations on the particular character of the intersubjective and embodied nature of human-horse

relationships in riding (Brandt; Daspher; Davis and Maurstad; Game; McManus and Montoya; Maurstad, Davin and Cowles; Nosworthy; Smith, "Human-Horse Partnerships"; Wipper; Zetterqvist Blokhuis) within emerging work on the complexity of human-horse relations more widely (Birke and Thompson; Davis and Maurstad). However, in her analysis of the imbrication of horse pedigrees and horse racing family dynasties in the elite thoroughbred horse racing industry in Newmarket in the UK, *The Sport of Kings*, Rebecca Cassidy explores how the incorporation of new members in those families depends on connections to and success with racehorses, which are then naturalized by a newly "found" genealogical connection. The pedigree of thoroughbred horses is fixed in stud books but family connections can be ascribed to those whose racing success warrants their inclusion (see also Cassidy, *Arborescent Culture*).

This attention to the deployment of genealogical models of kinship is central to the second strand of my approach, which is to conceptualize kinship as the making of relations, yet also to explore how ideas of genealogical relatedness — the formal location of individuals, human and nonhuman, in genealogical networks, ideas of connection and differentiation within them, and imaginaries of lineage, ancestry, inheritance, and pedigree — are deployed, and with what effects, in terms of the forging of connections and delineation of difference (Bamford and Leach). This entails considering genealogical knowledge-practices as ways of making kin that both mobilize and undermine kinship as genealogical, within and between kind and kin. This is not simply a matter of parallel idioms but entangled equine and human family histories and genealogical imaginaries.

Thirdly, I extend this engagement with human-horse relations and pedigrees further by considering how people's understandings of kinship among horses shapes how they understand their own relationships with horses, their practices of care, and the lives of horses. This, I will argue, relates to but is subtler than ideas of "instinct" and "group behavior" in explanations of companion animal behavior and guides to training practices (which Power addresses as one mode of understanding domestic dogs) since it allows for the subjecthood, sociality, and agency of animals. In this way kinship as an analytical framework attends to the intersubjective relations between horses and humans as they are shaped by wider understandings and practices of kinship. In what follows, I address the ways in which human genealogies, family histories, and horse ancestries are recorded, recounted, and entangled. I then consider the breeding, care, and riding of horses as practices of making human relations. In the final section I explore the significance of understandings of kinship among horses for human-horse relations, the ways in which those relations are practiced by people in terms of ideas of

spatial distance as well as species difference, and how kinship is enacted and recognized in subtle geographies of proximity and co-presence.

Pedigrees and Stories. The first formal records of horse pedigrees began in Iceland in the early 20th century, when a national register was established to record high quality horses (Hugason). *World Fengur* is now fully inclusive as all horses in Iceland, and Icelandic horses abroad must be registered within it. Users pay a fee to register and access information on horse pedigrees and numerical evaluations of a horse's qualities, and those of its ancestors and offspring. One account of this process suggests the parallels between the experience of human and equine genealogical research:

> When I met my first horse Sóti frá Tóftum (born in 1987), who has always been the best horse ever for me, I wanted to learn more about his descent. When I then learnt that his grandfathers Gustur 923 and Náttfari 776 were half-brothers and Sörli 653 was Sóti's double great-grandfather, it got more and more exciting. Later I found the worldwide database World-Fengur and went deeper and deeper into the fascinating past. (Mende 5)

Indeed, while the huge popularity of the *Book of Icelanders*, whose use is described as a national sport or pastime (Pálsson 138), reflects the recent enthusiasm for genealogy in and beyond Iceland, interests in genealogy in Iceland predate this and are not limited to human ancestry. As I was told: "Icelanders are crazy about pedigrees, dogs, horses and people; they like to know how they are connected and related." This is more than just a parallel interest in human and non-human animal ancestry. Though *The Book of Icelanders* and *World Fengur* are of distinctly human or horse ancestries, people and horses are entangled in genealogies, family histories, and national narratives.

Icelandic horse and human genealogies are culturally and historically rather than literally entwined. But they can be thought of as co-constituted in more material ways. This is most evident in the shaping of horse genealogies through selective breeding. Yet human family trees in the generations before agrarian modernization also reflect patterns of mortality, lifespan, and fertility in rural agricultural livelihoods that depended on the work of horses, whose ownership distinguished between farming households with some degree of security and landless laborers. The popular narrative of Icelandic settlement and survival enabled by horses, which provided labor and transport in an environment that until the mid-20th century was most easily traversed on horseback, rather than by horse drawn or later motorized vehicles, is a more undifferentiated national origin story.

This national interspecies history is paralleled by a rich printed and oral tradition of narratives in which individual horses and people are linked together, accounts of horse lineages and family horse breeding traditions, and family histories of human-horse relationships. Famous horses are part of the collective public culture in Iceland, commemorated in public statues, and widely known as national figures. As one breeder explained to me "we have these ancestors, ancestor stallions, and because the land is of course very small and the breed is not really big, then there are just a few of these big ancestors, these ancestors that we have like Orri frá Þúfu and Ófeigur frá Flugumýri," whose names are familiar to many who are not directly involved with horses. Digital media now supplement the print culture that includes mid-20th century books such as *Horfnir góðhestar* (Jónsson), which celebrates great horses of the past" and their relationship with humans, and the series of books published between 1968 and 1982 entitled *Ættbók og saga íslenska hestsins* (Pedigrees and Stories of Icelandic Horses) (e.g. Bjarnsson), which detail the ancestries and achievements of horses and the successes of those who bred them.

The degree of genealogical depth and detailed knowledge of this varies among people, generationally and in terms of their degree of involvement with horses. For those more directly involved, "pedigree talk" — the discussion of a horse's ancestry and how it relates to its qualities, whether the horse is theirs, a family member's, or a friend's, or one that has had competitive success or is of interest for buying — is one of the pleasures of horse culture.[4] As Birta, who runs a horse tour business, explained:

> There are many people, especially the people that are in breeding, they are really interested in that and they can talk for centuries about this and who is related with whom. They know all that and it's really important and it's nice. They are talking about families. They can see, it's this family and it's from this farm and this breeding. And maybe they knew the grandfather and they see that "ok this is the grandson" or "Aha, this is this family ok, and this one…." They knew these horses and it is interesting to see the offspring and what this will bring. […] When you know about the temperament for example, the special skills they have, or colours, there are many things that are interesting. And there are speculations about what came from where and lots of expert opinions.

These conversations use the idiom of familial relatedness and family lines to discuss pedigree and breeding, and interweave accounts of horses, places, and people: breeders, owners, trainers, riders, families, and farms.

Icelandic horses are always named with reference to the place in which they were bred (frá meaning from). Horse pedigrees and stories are thus not only about individual horses and humans but also about particular geographies of horse lineages, or what Birta describes as families. This may refer to older traditions of regionally and locally specific lineages — skyldeikarækt or "family/kin breed" — produced from inbreeding among a local group of horses. But "family" also refers to the "mixed' breeding lines — ættlínur — that are distinctive to a horse farm but not based on the exclusive breeding of local horses (Pálsson and Haraldsson) and thus to horse pedigrees based on the inter-breeding of horses from different parts of the island.

But family also applies to intergenerational traditions of breeding, which were common in the past as part of small-scale family farming, but can also continue in contemporary horse breeding, especially in horse farms which are devoted to horse breeding, often in combination with sheep farming. The owners of a horse breeding, training, riding instruction, and horse-tour farm in south Iceland began an account of the individual roles, experience, and expertise of the family members, by saying "family life is all about horses, that's just the way it is!" As in this case, breeding is often described in terms of a collective family enterprise that includes the older, now semi-retired generation, one or more sets of adult children and their partners, who may have met on agricultural or equine degree studies, and their children. Horses are thus not only the subject of "pedigree talk" but also embody family histories of breeding. An individual horse or group of horses is seen as the outcome of the skill, care, effort, and preferences of previous generations who made breeding decisions. People talk of their horses as being bred from particular mares and stallions that were the horses of their parents or grandparents or other family members in earlier generations.

Furthermore, "pedigree talk" and "family history" are not discrete categories. Family stories are often also accounts of people and their horses. Older or deceased family members are often remembered in terms of their relationships with horses — an uncle known for his beautiful horse, for example — and family histories are often accounts of lives served by, saved by, and lived with horses: a mother and baby saved by a horse willing to be ridden across a raging river to fetch a midwife; a cousin who was rescued as child by a horse who knew where to find shelter in a snow storm; horse drawn hearses taking away the bodies of deceased. While published histories of breeding have tended to be of traditions, knowledges, and lineages passed from fathers to sons, reflecting the gendered division of labor, authority, and power in farming households, family stories allow more room for women's relationships to horses: a mother who

tended a wounded horse for months to heal it; an aunt who crossed a dangerous river by horse to go to dances in her youth; a grandmother whose favorite horse would come to the farm kitchen window. Conversations move from remembering an individual to talking about their horse, horses or breed lines. But "pedigree talk" is not limited to those with family backgrounds in horse breeding, as many more people are involved in small-scale breeding as part of having horses to ride. Not all horse people in Iceland have family traditions of breeding and riding, but knowing one's horses is always in part about knowing their pedigrees. Families are also reconfigured through the relationships that develop between often middle aged married men and younger women from continental Europe who come to undertake equine studies and work with horses in Iceland, and stay to form new horse-breeding partnerships. Horses are not only part of family histories; kinship is also practiced through horses.

Kinship through horses. The forms of kinship that are practiced through horses include, but are not limited to, the familial. Collective family interests may mean that leisure riding can be enjoyed in multigenerational groups as children learn to ride very young, and as it is very common that people in their 80s and often 90s continue to ride. Shared interests make it possible for those living in urban Iceland to keep horses for leisure riding because the costs and efforts can also be shared. Horse care is largely done by horse owners themselves, who spend up to two hours, four or five evenings a week caring for their horses when they are stabled, often in a rota with family or friends. Sóldís, who lives and works in Reykjavík, explained that "it would be hard to do it alone." She has horses with her father and his brothers in a stable in one of the horse districts — large complexes of stables, paddocks, and competition arenas on the edge of the city — and on land near a rural summer house. The family has a weekly rota for cleaning the stables and visiting the horses near the summer house to feed them. This makes it possible to keep horses, and her family's support allowed her to remain involved when she was less able to help when she had children. Familial and wider social support also enables family members in late life to continue to breed and be actively involved with horses.

However, the involvement of older people with horses is also a matter of agency and autonomy and wider forms of sociality. It is not uncommon for people in their early 80s to undertake solo four day summer riding trips in the highlands with more than ten horses: "just horses, a bottle, and horsemanship." More often, the tradition of long distance annual summer horse tours involve groups of friends, partners, and relations, including those in their 70s who are fully engaged in the strenuous work of dealing with large groups of freely running horses and riding over rough terrain. These include

women only trips. Valhildur, who is in her mid-60s, keeps horses near her brother's farm and in the horse district near her home in Reykjavík. She regularly rides 65 kilometers between the city and her summer house near the farm to move her horses to and bring them back from the summer fields. She also takes part in an annual long distance horse tour with her women friends. Her sense of kinship among them is based on mutual and necessary trust between people and between people and horses. She described these tours as joyful times — riding, singing, telling stories, caring for the horses, and sleeping in cabins — thus echoing but also offering a contemporary counterpoint to the traditional homosociality of working with horses in sheep herding in the past.

This is a kinship based on shared experience with horses. Kinship is also practiced through working with horses more directly. Breeding, for example, can be an expression of care and respect for older or deceased family members, a way to maintain continuities of horse lineage and, through them, an emotional connection to those individuals and family farms, even if this is sometimes in tension with more "rational" breeding goals. Sóldís told me about the effort she is making to keep a particular line of mares that her father and grandfather had bred going, by producing a new female foal. "It is hard," she explained:

> We have been having more male foals than mares being born. We have waited a long time but my mare is now in foal at the moment — finally at the age of 18 — and I am waiting to see if it is a mare. Then we'll have to wait about 4 years for the foal to be old enough to be trained and then to see if it is a good horse. I need to be patient but it is frustrating when there are so many horses in Iceland and it would be easier to buy one tamed and trained and known to be a good horse.

The frustration is not only about the time involved but because honoring her grandfather's and father's breed tradition risks producing a horse that may not be safe for her to ride. She worries about the impact of her own possible injury on her daughter. Family breeding in this case means both filial work to maintain continuity and parental anxiety about the effects on her child of her being injured while riding. Many women in Iceland talked of how this often intensifies for women after giving birth. Valhildur recounted her adult daughter's efforts to ride a difficult horse as a way of dealing with this fear. Women's shifting subjectivity as new mothers is worked through this interspecies relation (Schuurman and Sireni).

Practicing kinship through horses can involve the dilemma of what to do with the horses of a family member who has died. This can be entangled with desires to maintain a sense of connection to a farm and locality after the death of the relative who lived there. Fjóla, whose grandfather had recently died aged 89, talked to me about her decision with her mother to rent out rather than sell his farm in the north of Iceland where she spent summers as a child and where her mother had grown up. This includes an arrangement for the last eight of her grandfather's horses to graze on the farm and be fed when necessary. She explained that "the horses were a family line that went back to his own grandfather and that was why they were so important to him. His father took the horses from his father" and they were bred locally with his, and then later with his brother's stallions. His horses were a matter of pride for her grandfather but also crucial to the farm work, particularly when he began farming. She recalls his enjoyment of driving out to see the horses in the home fields up towards the mountains and looking at them through binoculars, especially in spring when foals were born. So though renting out the farm honors her grandfather's wish for it to stay in the family, it is far more difficult to resolve what to do with the horses themselves and the breeding tradition they represent. For Fjóla, "because the horses were such a big part of my grandfather's identity, then of course it is who he was and that's partly who we are." She explained that they would sell the horses

> if there was someone with a special interest in them but I don't think there is anyone who would care for them like that. They are not tamed or trained. Maybe someone … because we have many relatives locally … just if they wanted to use the genetic line just to breed from them.

If this does not happen, her grandfather's line of mares will end when they die. Despite the emotional and practical burdens of dealing with this form of inheritance, horses can be a living connection to those who bred and valued them. The end of the lineage severs that connection. Though it means extra work in caring for the horses, Fjóla's mother has recently bred some foals from the mares and "dreams" of getting one of them trained for a grandchild to ride.

This sense of futurity as well as continuity is woven into the practice of kinship through horses, as people choose, breed, or train horses for their children or grandchildren to ride. Lilja, who runs a small horse riding tour business, explained that once someone decides that a new or soon to be born foal is going to be kept to be a special horse for one child, rather than being sold, they "do everything they can to make the horse become that horse" through care and training. "This makes it especially hard," she said,

"if that doesn't work out, and especially hard if you have also bred the horse." The work of making the horse into a special horse is an expression of love and care for the child. But as Margrét, who works for a national horse organization explained, care for the child in turn shapes the relationship to the horse. A young child starting riding needs "the perfect horse."

> It has to be very calm. It has to be not that willing to go fast, on its own at least, and it has to be a very special character, to let such a little person do all the controlling. So I had a horse like that and somehow that kind of horse, that does so much for your child really goes to your heart. That kind of character really is family. And horses are used in this role until they are maybe twenty-four. So of course it's your family really.

These horses she explained, "stay in the family" all their lives and are lent to younger relatives when the child has grown up.

But what may or may not work out is not solely a matter of the character of the horse but also reflects how relationships and subjectivities within families are structured through power as well as care, and practiced through differentiation as well as fellow feeling. A child might not be interested in the special horse, or one child may be favored over others as its recipient. Valhildur argued that the mutual trust that is required in riding eases intergenerational tensions since "the usual hierarchies in the family are not there when you are riding together. You trust each other and you trust the horses." Yet young people also assert their independence and difference within a family through rejecting its focus on horses, with all the range of parental reactions that can entail. People thus enact kinship through horses in Iceland in shared family effort and experience, in caring for horses as a means of caring for and maintaining connections with older generations, and by bringing relationships with horses into the lives of younger family members, though never in isolation from familial dynamics of power and difference as well as love and unanimity.

Kinship with and among horses. But how are kin and kind, connection and difference, understood, practiced and experienced in human-horse relations? In Iceland questions of kinship with horses are inseparable from understandings of kinship or, more broadly, social relations, *among* horses. While people use terms such as "family member" or "friend" to indicate the depth their relationships with particular horses, the dominant figuring of horses in Iceland is that "they are horses." The repeated injunction to "let horses be horses" is underpinned by an understanding of horses as social

subjects who relate to each other in groups, are happiest when together, who call to each other from the paddock or fields when separated, who greet each other when horses return to a group, who form distinct relationships within groups, and work to maintain them, and who negotiate group entry, inclusion and hierarchy.[5] Knowing horses well means coming to recognize the "diverse sensory modalities" — of sound, gesture and movement — of their intersubjective "affect attunement" (Willett and Suchak). Icelandic studies of horse behavior argue that allowing horses to be social is key to their welfare (Sigurjónsdóttir; Sigurjónsdóttir and Haraldsson). Horse people in Iceland insist that the quality of the human-horse relationship depends on recognizing that relationships between horses are fundamental to horse behavior and to the quality of a horse's life with humans and among horses. Even those who feel very close to their horses do not assume that a horse's relationship with them is more significant than their relationships with other horses.

This understanding of horses as social herd animals is a strand of equine studies (see van Dierendonck and Goodwin) and part of a wider turn to "natural" horse care (Birke), but Icelandic horse care is distinctive in being organized to as far as possible "allow horses to be horses." This means "allowing them to be together." Horses are born and raised in groups that typically spend from June to December in extensive open ranges with minimal human contact and are not trained until they are 4 or 5 years old. Even when stabled, horses are never kept alone and spend time outside in groups every day. They are thus more often with other horses than with people. It is this, Icelandic horse people assert, that makes them physically and mentally strong and socially confident. Human attention through grooming and exercise is certainly viewed as important to horse welfare, but also as a knowing compensation for the curtailment of their life in the herd in the fields (for at least part of the year) in order to have a riding relationship with them.

Understanding horses "as horses" thus involves both an insistence on difference and an appreciation of continuity between humans and horses in terms of the practice of kinship and sociality, "including the ability to distinguish family members from non-kin and members of one's own social group from strangers, newcomers and outsiders" (Smith, *Scandalous* 156). However, attitudes vary as to the appropriateness of a familial idiom to describe horse relationships. When people talked to me about a group of horses in a paddock or field they described their relationships in terms of immediate parentage, offspring, siblinghood, and sometimes complex degrees of genealogical relatedness through breeding (e.g. horses sharing a particular stallion as a grandfather) but also in terms of which horses have developed particularly close relationships, who

choose to be together, and who play with and groom each other. Even for those who use the familial as adjective for these relations, kinship among horses, like human kinship, is understood as both genealogical and practiced, given and made. As Lilja explained:

> They want to be together. They are family. There is a strong bond between them. Horses that grow up together, either because they are siblings, or born in the same year and grow up and are trained together. Or in my case because they are mother and daughter. You can see that their bond is very, very strong. They do not like to be separated for very long. That is not the norm and they are very happy when they are together again. But two horses that grow up together, that just live together in the same stable for a long time can develop that connection. It doesn't need to be DNA.

For some, the term family rather than herd signals the depth of the bonds between horses and the character of their collective relationships. This is kinship as initiated and practiced in the shared spaces and rhythms of the horses' lives rather than fixed by, and limited to, genetic relatedness.

Yet for others the idiom of the family is problematic for both people and horses. Hallbjörg teaches children to ride and understand horses. In doing so she discourages children from interpreting her description of horses' parentage and offspring within a group in terms of a conventional human family of "mama, papa, baby" because it not only elides horse difference but also naturalizes socially conservative models of the family — nuclear, heternormative, patriarchal — in human society. "The horses don't have a family," she argues:

> only these relationships while the mares are milking and so on. Of course, I think they know each other, if they are brother and sister, like that, there is some connection but it is not family … family is a dangerous word.

For her, projecting a narrow model of the family onto horse groups problematically closes down the possibilities for recognizing, respecting, and living alternative forms of human relationality and sociability, including solitary and independent life as a woman, and, in her case, with horses. How people understand relationships among horses thus not only shapes how human-horse relationships are described, understood, and practiced, but also how human kinship and family forms are conceived of and contested.

However, it is the figure of the "pet" rather than the description of the horse relationships as familial that is most frequently rejected in accounts of human-horse relations in Iceland. "Pet" in this case means an animal that is treated and touched in particular ways — indulged, pandered to, stroked, and cuddled — and is used as a pejorative counterpoint to an Icelandic model of human-horse difference and human authority. Hallbjörg tells the children she teaches that:

> A horse is a horse and not a cuddly toy. I have to tell them "no this is an animal, like us as animals, but different to us. The horse is not a man." […] The first thing to explain is that the horse doesn't think like you. It is quite different and if you are going to ride him, if you are going to be able to control a horse you have to work with the horse and to work with the horse you have to try to understand it. And then I try to explain that the horse is a group animal and in a group there is always a leader and in this situation you have to be the leader because if the horse is the leader he can take you wherever and where you don't want to go.

In contrast to the figure of the sentimentalized "pet" or "toy," horses are understood by Icelandic horse people as herd animals that are happiest when those who care for and ride them give them the sense of security and safety they are used to within hierarchically organized horse groups by acting the dominant "leader" in the relationship. The possibility of achieving a deep relationship with a horse based on mutual understanding and trust is not set against an explicitly hierarchical relationship but depends upon it (Hansen; Patton). Trainers, breeders, and riders are unanimous in their insistence that a horse-centered approach to training and riding is one of clear, consistent, and fair rules that ensure the respect of the horse for the human, create a foundation for a close human-horse relationship, and are key to the well-being of the horse. Sometimes this is explained through the analogy of a parent-child relationship based on parental love, care, authority, and consistent and fair rules and boundaries, but not in ways that humanize horses or depart from the key tenet of horse difference.

This perspective is not uniquely Icelandic but it is argued there that Icelandic practices of care create the conditions that allow for the depth of kinship possible between people and horses in Iceland. In contrast to ideas of affectionate touch, intimacy, and indulgence evoked by the figure of the "pet," it is spatial distance, as well as respect for species difference, that is posited as key to the possibility of mutually rewarding human-horse relationships. Icelandic horses, it is argued, learn the rules of social life

among horses through their early years in the herd with little human contact. Trainers work with "horse talk" — the language of relational movement through which horses communicate and practice their sociality — to enable horses to read their instructions (Brandt). They explained to me that horses who learn the rules of hierarchy in the herd accept human leadership much more easily. Horses who have been too near humans, touched too much and given treats, they argue, are much harder to train because they have lost their sense of the rules of respectful interaction. Respect is thus spatial relation.

Those that have lost respect are described as pushing into the personal space of the human, as Helga, a competitive rider, breeder and trainer put it: "The horse is always trying to move your legs," to make someone back away as the horse approaches them, so "they can walk more into your space" and assert their power to do so. Hallbjörg warns of the dangers of mistaking some horse actions, such as trying to rub their heads on the rider after they dismount, as affection: "If a horse puts its head on your shoulder it is not being affectionate; it is trying to be dominant. You have to make it keep its distance." Human models of affection can mean misinterpreting horse actions, as Helga explained: "People want kisses and hugs. But the horses don't want it. They just want to be outside eating grass." But horses are also trained to come to accept humans entering their space in horse care, and even more profoundly in riding. Sigurlín, an experienced breeder and trainer, explained that training and riding mean authoritative but respectful entry into the horse space, as well as control over horse incursion into human space:

> I have my space and you have your space and you are not crossing my space if I don't allow you to do it. But some people think that horses do not have their space. It is the same with people, this your space and this is my space. And of course I cross it when I saddle you up but then I do it because I kind of tell you what I am going to do and then we do it together in a way but still I control it.

Leadership is thus also a spatial practice.

But interspecies kinship — senses of fellowship, mutuality, connection — is also a spatial relation, based on proximity, co-presence as well as embodied contact. As in other leisure riding cultures, the idea of affective connection between an individual horse and human, especially through mutual bodily attunement in riding, is aspired to and celebrated (Hagström; Maurstrad, et al.; Zetterqvist Blokhuis). Yet those who

sought to articulate the depth of some human-horse relationships turned to examples of moments of communion when the horse and human were nearby rather than riding. Their reflections on the more mundane practices of kinship rather than the ideal of the mutual corporeality and temporary transcendence of difference between horse and rider resonate with other accounts of relaxed mutual attentiveness in longstanding human-horse relationships "on the ground" (Birke and Hockenhull 98). For Anna, who bred and trained horses and taught horse training over many decades, the depth of a human-horse relationship is not a matter of horses appearing to express affection or of being eager to be touched affectionately: "they don't seek human touch." Instead, it is experienced in unselfconscious co-presence, in moments between active engagement in riding, as a horse-human "dynamic" or "'in sync" relation. This "body language and synchronization between a horse and a rider" can be seen, she suggests, at competitions, when the rider stands holding their horse's neck waiting for the result, both mutually "in the moment" or

> in a break in a horse trek when the riders are talking together and they are leaning on their horses' backs and the horse is quite happy and they are just standing there […] your horse is standing there and he is grazing and it has had enough to eat and they are just standing there resting one foot and they are hanging their head above you and you are talking to your friend. You can see a lot of friendship and acceptance and relationships. But it is not standing there petting your horse. It is in terms of both being in the same situation at the same time; both know what is going on. It is a routine and there is a certain calmness and acceptance and relationship going on that I think we miss because for us it is a very natural thing. It is very special and I think a lot of these horses that we own that we use a lot, we go into this kind of unity with them and we are not so aware of it.

In reflecting on the "lots of little subtle things that people do and horses do that nobody notices that say so much about the relationship between people and horses," Anna asserts her sense of the expressive intentionality and agency of horses. This attentiveness to the subtle spatiality of human-horse kinship is not unusual. Birta told me about one occasion in a break on a ride with the horse that she had a special relationship with as a teenager:

> It was in the spring with green grass and I was lying down in it and she was grazing. I had her on a long rein. She was eating by my side here so you could almost see a person when I stood up. I was like I can't move,

> this is too good. It's like "I want to be close to you" that is the best. It was so nice. This is a communication as well. She was eating. But it was not just eating. We were having fun. […] And when I did [exhales deeply] she did that as well. That was our thing. There was nothing in it. It is just like "I know you are there." I was always sure that if I did [exhales] she would [exhale].

Respecting horse difference and in particular horse sociality thus does not mean that everything horses do is reduced to instinctive herd behavior or interpreted simply as the effect of human channeling of horse instinct in training. Foregrounding the "things horses do" as an expression of mutual connection is not to suggest that their agency is not deeply circumscribed by human power in the relationship (Hansen; Patton). But it does leave room for the agential specificity of horses — what they choose to do within the constraints of what it is possible to do — to be acknowledged. Accounts of embodied communion, harmony, or "oneness" between horses and riders in riding do not elide the volition of horses, since communion depends on mutual trust and shared understanding, rather than simple dominance. Yet, what the horse should be doing to achieve that state of bodily synchronicity is determined by what the rider wants them to be doing, whether this is communicated in deeply subtle bodily signals or more direct ways. This is not to deny the possibilities of the mutual pleasure of horse and rider in corporeal synchronity or "entrainment" (Argent). However, it is also worth attending to human-horse relations beyond riding itself, relations that are often shaped but not wholly defined by or limited to riding. Horses not being ridden and not constrained can choose to move away, stay near, or come closer. Rannveig, who keeps horses to ride and work with on her sheep farm, explained that her horses express their relationship to her through moving to be nearby: "When I go and walk among them out in the big field. It is a few hectares. They just come and stand with me, or look at what I am doing so ... you know, just be there like a friend who sits there but does not say anything." Horses thus express their relationship to significant humans in some of the proxemic (Argent 115) ways they do with the horses with whom they are friends: approaching or following them, staying close, grazing near by, resting together (Feh; van Dierendonck and Goodwin). The term "preferred proximity partners" is used by those studying horse behavior in an Icelandic herd to describe the long term relationships between horses "who have a close spatial partnership" (van Dierendonck, et al. 289). Being nearby, staying nearby, and coming to be nearby, without touching and without being too close, can be read as expressions of kinship — a kinship not of genealogical relation but of affiliation and familiarity within and between kind.

Conclusion. The intersubjective relations between people and horses that are expressed in subtle spatialities of proximity and co-presence are aligned with other accounts that explore interspecies relatedness forged through bodily care, intimacy, and shared lives (Govindrajan). Exploring kinship of different kinds, among people, among horses, and between horses and people, including genealogical imaginations and practices, situates these spatialities of interspecies kinship in wider sets of relations. These are not limited to the familial. Horse people in Iceland enjoy the kinship of shared experience with horses as an alternative to, within or in addition to "family life with horses." Some deploy the idiom of the familial to express the significance of relations with and among horses, while others reject it because of its socially conservative associations. Understanding kinship in terms of practices of making significant relations of different kinds works against the naturalization of narrow, limited, and reactionary models of relatedness, among and between humans and animals. Furthermore, the practice of "pedigree talk" — discussions of horse genealogies in relation to the character of particular horses as the outcomes of breeding and in terms of breeding potential — is not only a distinctive feature of Icelandic horse culture but, to some extent, of wider public life. In Iceland, horses as well as people are "ancestors." And like the exchange of human family history and genealogical information "pedigree talk" can be understood as practices of making relations, within and beyond those linked by human or horse genealogies. Horses can embody the horse breeding efforts and interests of past generations and the potential continuation of lineage and thus of connection, back to those passed and forward to the future generation. Kinship of different kinds includes the making of genealogical connections among people into kinship relations through the care and breeding of horses, as well as the kinships made through and with horses.

Moreover, the practice of making significant relations is always about differentiation and degree, selectivity and exclusion, rather than generalized kinship. This is as much the case with interspecies kinship as with human kinship, a matter of which kinds come to be kin as well as which specific members of kinds. The concept of interspecies kinship radically undoes conventional models of who is related to whom and how, but also tracks practices of differentiation and distinction between kin and other categories of difference, including species and breed. Interspecies kinship is shaped by how an individual animal is located within categories of animal difference, not only those of "wild" or "domestic," "native" or "exotic," for example, but also, for horses and other domesticated animals, how they are understood and valued as individuals, as representatives of the breed and embodiments of pedigree and lineage within the breed, and evaluated in relation to other members of the breed (Irvine; Nash, "Breed Wealth").

Relationships with horses vary in their nature, intensity, and depth. The "special horse" is a horse among many "ordinary" horses and, as ever, the power to differentiate is framed by human power to decide upon the nature and duration of the lives of horses. Understandings of interspecies kinship are enriched by recognizing the way in which human understandings of kinship among animals shapes animals lives and human-nonhuman relations. However, recognizing the significance of relations among horses does not mean that they are allowed to continue if they clash with other decisions about what should or has to done for the sake of the breed or for the sake of making a living. People curtail and reconfigure relationships within horse groups when horses are culled, bought, and sold as people negotiate the contradictions and compromises between what is best for horses and what they want from horses.

This certainly complicates but does not undermine the significance of the often overlooked spatialities of kinship between horses and people in Iceland. Senses of closeness or connection with horses are experienced not only in the ideal of embodied communion in the practice of riding but also in the subtle geographies of proximity. Human leadership and mutual respect between people and horses are understood and practiced as spatial relations, based on ideas of the spatial negotiation of rank, respect, and power among horses. Though understandings of the social nature of horses underpins ideals of horse welfare in Iceland, it is the significance of leadership among horses, more specifically, that is drawn on to explain the nature of human-horse relations, rather than the spatial practices of "proximity partners." Yet people experience and recognize the relational behavior and agency of horses that choose to stay or come to be nearby them as expressions of connection. They accord their horses the intentionality of affective response as they work through the complexity, and, ultimately, unknowability of human-horse difference – what is shared across kind, what counts as species difference — and of what they mean to their horses. People resist collapsing human-horse difference and reject absolute difference. Interspecies kinship is always a "partial connection" (Govindrajan 25). In this case, affective interspecies intimacy is experienced not through overcoming distance and difference, but in being together nearby. This opens up the possibility of recognising interspecies kinship in the things horses, as well as people, do.

Notes

1. With a human population of 364,134 people on 1 January 2020 (https://www.statice.is/statistics/population/inhabitants/) and a horse population of 94,209 in 2019 (https://www.feif.org/FEIF/Factsandfigures/Registeredhorses.aspx)

Iceland has approx. one horse per every 3.8 persons. This compares with reported figures of approx. one equid (horses, ponies and donkeys) per 21 persons in Belgium in 2015 which is the highest in the EU (*Removing the Blinkers*).

2. Horse ownership and leisure riding is less elitist in Iceland than in other Euro-American contexts, especially in rural Iceland, but rising costs are making it become more difficult for lower income urban residents to participate. This is being addressed by the Icelandic network of riding clubs in the Icelandic Equestrian Association (Landssamband Hestamannafélaga) through subsidizing riding for children from low income backgrounds.

3. This paper draws on research funded by the British Academy and undertaken in Reykjavík and in rural north west and south west Iceland over six months in 2016. It foregrounds the strand of work addressing kinship within a wider cultural geographical research project that explored the cultural, economic, and encounter value of Icelandic horses (Nash, "Breed Wealth"). Though riding is central to horse cultures, my focus was on horse breeding and care, and human-horse relations more broadly. In addition to observational, and in some cases, participatory work, on horse farms, rental businesses, and cultural centers, thirty-one informal qualitative interviews were undertaken with participants that I identified as involved in Icelandic horse culture through their institutional or business websites, or who were recommended to me. They included competition judges and riders, dealers, breeders, trainers, leisure riders, those running horse tourism businesses, farmers, equine veterinarians and educators, and representatives of breed organizations. The interviews took place in people's homes, stables, and places of work, and in many cases were preceded or followed by conversations and observations while being shown around stables and introduced to horses in stalls and in paddocks. The interviews focused on people's practices of horse care, their views of the nature and meaning of their relationships with horses, and their wider perspectives on horse culture in Iceland. While keenly conscious of the challenges and limits of doing so, the research also sought to observe, as well as to discuss, interactions between people and horses, not while riding but in practices of horse care, in terms of touch, movement, sound, and gesture. These observations inform my engagement with what people said, but my attention to horse agency in their relations with people draws most heavily on the recounted observations and perspectives of my participants. My reflections on my own desire for affective connection with horses in Iceland as I came to understand people's insistence on horse difference also shape my consideration of kinship with horses. All participants have been anonymized.

4. I use this term to encompass the commonalities between talk of human lineage and animal pedigree as does Cassidy (*The Sport of Kings* 33) in engaging with "family talk" among elite English thoroughbred horse people.

5. These accounts of hierarchy in horse groups deserve further consideration. The term hierarchy often evokes a model of usually male competition for dominance and thus sexual success that has been entrenched in animal behavior studies and pervasive in popular understandings. Yet, the continuous and contextual negotiation of status among mares, among geldings, among stallions, and within mixed groups of horses that horse people in Iceland observe are recognized as complex forms of social interaction that involve age, kinship, the condition and character of individual horses, and their length of time in or newness to the herd. Nor are horses' negotiations of these relations of relative "rank" incompatible with other forms of sociality such as play, mutualism, cooperation, and long-term partnerships. They are often about conflict avoidance rather than aggression, and critics of the focus on dominance suggest interaction between horses is based "not on domination or even confrontation, but on cooperation and approval seeking" (Sharpe 197). Exploring this complexity is preferable to the crude model of alpha-male dominance and competitive aggression that "contaminates the humans who impose this theory just as much as the animals upon whom it is imposed" (Despret 59).

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