

Jopi Nyman

Horse as Significant Other: Discourses of Affect and Therapy in Susan Richards's *Chosen by a Horse: How a Broken Horse Fixed a Broken Heart*

Introduction. The transformation of the animal from the Other of Cartesian modernity to a central actor in late modern culture has been registered in recent literary and cultural studies, such as Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* and Philip Armstrong's *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*. Literary texts, as Armstrong claims, have for a long while reflected on the relationship between "the animal" and its various counterparts, including "humanity" and "culture" (1). When mapping out the development of the literary representation of animals at various points in the history of modernity, Armstrong emphasizes its diversity that runs counter to traditional juxtapositions: while Swift's eighteenth-century satires call for "sympathetic identification between human and animal" (48), contemporary postmodernist writing often critiques western industrialism and science, which have caused the destruction of wild and unspoilt nature (170). The widely-held opposition between the humans and the animals has been questioned by other critics as well. While Huggan and Tiffin discuss texts problematizing widely-held views of agency and sexuality as solely human characteristics (see 190–201), Susan McHugh emphasizes the interconnectedness of the various species and suggests that non-human animals do not function "as supplements to human subjects" but it is "as actors" that they contribute to the "shaping" of humans (3). Life narratives, as I will argue, are a site for exploring such relationality.

To fill in a gap in earlier research, this essay draws from the insight provided by the affective turn (see, e.g., Clough and Halley; Gregg and Seigworth) to examine the relationship between humans and animals at the level of a particular human-animal encounter, a horse and her human caregiver, as depicted in contemporary autobiographical writing by Susan Richards. By examining Richards's recent memoir in the framework of current theorizations of affect, the essay seeks to develop, first, an understanding of a hitherto neglected thematic and, second, a new critical vocabulary for human-animal studies to address life narratives telling of the emotionally loaded relations between humans and non-humans. The importance of such relations has been pointed out by several scholars in human-animal studies who have suggested that pets, or companion animals, have a particularly significant role to play today. As Lisa

Sarmicanic suggests, the fact that companion animals occupy a place in our homes tells of their difference from other animals, wild and domesticated (164). What also marks companion animals as different is that their task is to “fulfil certain social and emotional needs,” often in the role “of a friend” (164).

In order to examine the particular characteristics of this close bond, this essay focuses on the role of the animal in autobiographical writing, a genre where the stories of “significant others” contribute to the narrator’s “self-formation” (Smith and Watson 65). In my discussion of the importance of companion animals in human lives, I will address their affective representation in contemporary autobiographical writing with particular reference to Susan Richards’s *Chosen by a Horse: How a Broken Horse Fixed a Broken Heart* (2006), a book that has been followed with two sequels, *Chosen Forever: A Memoir of a Horse, a Book, and Finding Love* (2009) and *Saddled: How a Spirited Horse Reined Me In and Set Me Free* (2010). *Chosen by a Horse* is a multi-faceted example of the current tendency of weaving the affective into a pet memoir and performs thus what McHugh finds central to the genre: it “negotiate[s] a politics of intimate spheres” (121). While its explicit focus is on its narrator’s relationship with her new animal companion, the mare Lay Me Down, it contextualizes the relationship in her personal history and the discourse of trauma. The human-horse relationship depicted in Richards’s memoir emerges as one that is intricately linked with her changing identity. By reading *Chosen by a Horse* in the context of affect theory, I suggest that its emotional representation of the bond between humans and horses is not a mere marker of the increasingly individualized and emotional relationship between humans and animals characterizing late modern culture, as could be imagined. Rather, I will contend that this relationship, represented in *Chosen by a Horse* by the use of a discourse of healing and self-regeneration, seeks to reconstruct the traumatized subject and negotiate her identity. As I will also suggest, the affective representation of the horse and its significance to the self-transformation of the traumatized autobiographical narrator is also part of the therapeutic discourse of contemporary American culture.

From the perspective of human-animal studies the essay contributes to what Kari Weil refers to as its ethical turn, in her review of the recent developments in the field (16–17). Through a discussion of Richards’s narrative telling of its narrator’s emotional relationship with Lay Me Down, a former crippled and abused racehorse that she decides to help, I suggest that the text can be seen as an example of what Weil terms as

“an attempt to recognize and extend care to others,” revealing “a concern with and for alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world” (17). As Richards’s narrator comes to recognize her traumatized past and understands that the relationship with the non-human is a way of working through trauma, the memoir reconstructs her identity and emphasizes the links between the fields of trauma studies and human-animal studies (cf. Weil 17). In such an approach, affect, this essay argues, is the mode through which human and non-human, culture and nature, are shown to be interrelated rather than isolated. To use the words of Sarah J. Whatmore: “it is a mistake to posit humanity (culture) as somehow existing apart from the world of things (nature); the human comes into being with this world” (37; emphasis original). *Chosen by a Horse* is an example of such processes.

The Affective Turn and the Non-Human. As the consequences of the affective turn in the human and social sciences have shifted the focus of research onto such issues as passions and emotions, researchers have sought to open up new areas of study left unexamined in the past. As Anu Koivunen claims with particular reference to the role of the affective turn in feminist theory, its proponents emphasize its capability of locating the personal and the emotional in the research or point to the ways it provides an alternative and more general frame where the representational is replaced with the real, the cultural with the natural (Koivunen 9-10). Some trends in affect theory stress a critique of constructivist approaches and promote phenomenological or Deleuzian thinking; it should also be noted that while no unified theory of affect can be found, the turn has been accepted by both post-structuralist and anti-poststructuralist scholars (9–10). The diversity of affective approaches is also evident in conceptual discourse. Koivunen reports that it is best seen in the use of such terms as emotion and affect. While some theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Teresa Brennan use the two terms interchangeably, for others they may appear as different phenomena (10). Regardless of the terminological problems, the affective turn foregrounds a particular way of responding to others and provides a useful way of approaching cultural texts working with affects, including those addressing human-animal relations. While the heightened interest in the affective in culture may be a characteristic of contemporary society valuing constant self-reflexivity and self-making, mobility and liquidity, as suggested by social theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, its various forms call for detailed scrutiny.

The affective bond between humans and animals can be examined from various perspectives. In her overview of the relationship between humans and companion animals in particular, Sarmicanic mentions that people gain both physical and

psychological benefits from companion animals (166–168). Animal companions, she suggests, are able to “ground and balance us as humans” and boost such feelings as “certainty and happiness” (169). The psychological benefits of the human-animal bond can be located in a sociological context, too. In his discussion of the relationship between humans and animals in modern society, Adrian Franklin has suggested that the increasing presence of the latter as companion animals is linked with their role as alleviators of what Giddens has referred to as ontological insecurity in modern society and its transforming human relationships (57). In Franklin’s view, with animals humans are able to create “enduring relations of mutual dependency” (57). Such relationships are by definition affective relationships, involving feelings and emotions with others — here with non-humans.

The recognition of such relationality leads to the problematization of dominant models of self and identity. As the human and the animal are interrelated, the basis of the traditional Cartesian model of the autonomous and unified Western subject based on human Reason faces a crisis because it is based on oppositions (subject vs. object, mind vs. body, nature and culture) that have set the self apart from its Others (see Lloyd; Connell 186–87). The Cartesian subject, as Badmington suggests, has relied on “Reason [that] not only grants the subject the power of judgement; it also helps ‘us’ to tell the difference between the human and the non-human” (3). The increasing role given to emotions and deep relations with others, while formerly marginalized, problematize the maintenance of such boundaries and point to their potential significance in autobiographical representations of animals and the need to foreground such features in their analysis.

Autobiographical narratives dealing with animals can be divided roughly into two groups: life narratives written from the perspective of the human participant such as Richards’s that tend to address the shared relationship between an animal and its guardian, and those that (appear to) provide the viewpoint of the non-human. Writing of the origins of the genre of animal autobiography Margo DeMello suggests that the publication of texts telling the life story of an animal, such as *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* (1783) by Dorothy Kilner, Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877), and Virginia Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography* (1933), shows how women writers, often allegorically, have sought to provide the voiceless with a voice and a life story (3). The problem, however, is that of representation and language: how accurate and authentic can human representations of

animals be, especially if they claim to represent the animal's view point? Such questions have been addressed by several scholars and Karla Armbruster, for one, has suggested that a possible way to think about the representation of "animal voices and minds" — in fiction as well as in life narrative — is to recognize their often shared aim, "a yearning to genuinely know the otherness of nonhuman animals" (19). Such an aim is particularly well pronounced in such works as the autobiographical narratives by the autistic scientist and writer Temple Grandin, who has suggested that because of her condition she is particularly well tuned to the animal world: "In addition to a greater sensitivity to touch that allows her to read cows' and horses' body language with her fingers, she maintains that she is able to see what and how nonhuman animals see" (Weil 119). In addition to Grandin's texts exploring the interface of humans and non-human animals, the genre of life writing dealing with animals may include texts as diverse as narratives of animal catching by the naturalist and zoo-keeper Gerald Durrell, Joy Adamson's narratives of African animals, and contemporary travel texts addressing issues of conservationism and human-animal encounters, such as Brian Payton's *In Bear Country: A Global Journey in Vanishing Wilderness* (2007) and Linda Spalding's *Follow* (1998), a narrative of her search for the true story of the primatologist Biruté Galdikas and her orangutans (see Nyman, *Postcolonial*; Nyman, "Ethical Encounters" 108-127). While formally and ideologically distinct, as they are rooted in different historical and cultural contexts, such texts provide diverse perspectives onto the multiple experiences of human-animal relations and their various meanings in human and animal lives.

Recent studies of life writing dealing with animals have reflected on the genre's response to life narratives that depart from the conventional requirements of genre by challenging its individualist legacy. In her introduction to "Post-ing Lives," a recent special issue of the journal *Biography*, Gillian Whitlock expands the concerns of the autobiography as a genre by examining it in the context of post-Cartesian thinking, where the rational and human subject of modernity has been problematized. She draws attention to the ways in which contemporary autobiographical narratives critique the traditional subject by voicing various ideas of the human in new contexts and the ways in which they are "entangled variously in nature, culture, and technology" (vii). The autobiography, while traditionally linked with the Enlightenment project of narrating the development of a matured and apparently reasonable self, is also able to contest such normative teleologies. As Linda Anderson describes its work: it "'place[s]' the subject, the 'I,' only to be undone by the instability and difference" (12). In the history of life writing, Anderson suggests, revisions of genre conventions are associated with women and postcolonial authors in particular: where Virginia Woolf's autobiographical

writings are known for their ability to “undermin[e] the unity and confidence of that universal ‘I’ claimed by the masculine subject” (102), postcolonial autobiographical writers such as Michael Ondaatje, often detached from a fixed sense of home and identity, are constantly “reinventing themselves, their location and community” (120). Life writing dealing with animals and especially the transforming human-animal relationship has similar potential to reconstruct and address new modes of identity and relationality in contemporary society.

The position of the animal viz. autobiographical narrative is, however, problematic, as suggested above. In Huff and Haefner’s study of what they term as animalographies, i.e., stories allegedly written “‘by’ and about animals” (153), the authors distinguish between “popular posthumanism” and “critical posthumanism” (155). While the former seeks “to describe and colonize, through human language and perception, the subjectivities of other species,” the latter “analyzes the relationships between subjectivities, and studies how those subjectivities transform in the process of engaging each other” (Huff and Haefner 155). In their view the latter form of writing, and especially such texts as Haraway’s partly autobiographical *When Species Meet*, are particularly important because of the mutual transformations they depict. Although Haraway’s text is unable to capture the experience of the dog, it is, however, in their view strongly engaged with the non-human because of its “deep analysis of relationality” (168). Such relationality, as I will argue in my reading of Richards’s text, is emotionally charged but also limited by the genre’s demands and its conventional focus on the human participant’s development.

Constructing Sentimentality. Right from the beginning, Richards’s work locates the story of *Lay Me Down* in the contexts of affect and ethics. At surface level, the description of the abused horse in the book promotes a sentimentalist response often used in a didactic manner to boost animal welfare as in such works Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*. As Natalie Corinne Hansen points out, such strategies construct humans as saviors and redeemers and can also be located in today’s discourses promoting “animal rights and animal welfare” (227). This is evident in the first chapter of the book, in which the narrator acquires an abused horse, “a bay-colored skeleton [...] followed by a muddy foal” (9), from the local SPCA in whose paddock 40 abandoned horses are “stumb[ing] in mud” (2). In the course of the narrative, the empathetic relationship with this suffering and sick horse escaping “misery” (8), while starting from pity,

develops into a sense of deep relationality. Yet the discourse of sentimentalism seeks an affective response from the reader by underlining the suffering of the horses, since their physical condition has been generated by human carelessness and desire for economic profit. In fact, DeMello considers suffering as a key theme in the genre of animal autobiography (8). The issue is clearly present in Richards's description of the bodily suffering of the horses:

The mares struggled in the deep mud on swollen joints weakened by malnutrition and untreated racing injuries. Many of the horses had open, weeping sores on their legs and flanks. All wheezed and coughed with respiratory illnesses, and green phlegm oozed from eyes and noses. (7–8)

In addressing the abuse experienced by the horses, *Chosen by a Horse* appears to foreground what Weil understands as characterizing the fields of trauma and human-animal studies: “we can recognize the serious harms rendered to victims of horrific acts, but we cannot count on those victims to tell us their stories or what to do about them” (17). As the text's descriptions of suffering horses emphasize, they call for an ethical response, enacted here as a form of caring for the non-humans and their alterity.

In Richards's text, the narrator's decision to care for the other is linked with her own personal past and traumatic experiences. What appears noteworthy in the memoir's description of the events leading to the arrival of Lay Me Down is that the narrator reflects on her changing attitude and distinguishes her relationship with the ailing mare from her other relationships with her other horses and human friends. The trope of illness, rooted in the narrator's memories of the incurable leukemia of her mother and the resulting traumatized childhood of the narrator, is emphatically present in the text. This confrontation with the abused horses is termed as “different” and as something “previously avoided” (1). As she puts it:

I was not accustomed to going to the rescue. Mine was never the face friends saw smiling over them as they woke up in the hospital after surgery. I wasn't the one they called to drive them to get their stitches out or to pick up the results of lab tests or X-rays or anything medical. I had a horror of sickness, my own or anyone else's. (1–2)

The construction of this episode as “different,” and its later significance in the narrator's transforming life, is related to the fact that Richards's narrative stems from therapeutic discourse. When starting to care for Lay Me Down, Susan is in her forties and works as

a social worker. Before the career change, her life has been troublesome. Following the death of her mother when she was five, she spent her traumatic childhood in various foster homes involving experiences of unacceptance and shame. After college, she worked as an English teacher in Boston but spent her evenings in a local sports bar, drinking white wine and “danc[ing] in [her] underwear,” as well as seeking acceptance from the men there. Marrying an abusive and hard-hitting tennis coach, a former Vietnam vet, she has moved out to Vermont only to find out about his real character. Horses, however, are the way out, and upon buying Georgia, a three-year-old and troublesome Morgan mare, she leaves her husband and starts to remake her home. The narrative emphasizes the safety of her own house as a space exempt from domestic violence (see 54), represented in the text as a further step on the ladder of increased self-knowledge, i.e., her “healing,” recuperation from an abusive relationship. In so doing Richard’s book reworks Virginia Woolf’s famous metaphor of “a room of one’s own,” the importance of which is supported by Richards’s literary aspirations alluded to in the text (see 88–89). It is conspicuous, as the following section will show, that the narrator’s caring relationship with her non-human companions, horses such as Georgia and Lay Me Down, plays a major role in this process of reconstructing her identity.

Countering Loss. Richards’s narrator’s new way of life, without alcohol and a husband, is emphatically linked with horses as significant others that are capable of transforming lives. While they have been part of Susan’s life since childhood, Georgia functions as her way of escaping the pressures of the abusive marriage. The close relationship with the companion animal provides an alternative to violent home dinners and extensive consumption of wine. To use the narrator’s words, “the idea of being with Georgia for the next thirty years [...] made me think about my life and where it was going [...] I didn’t want to bring anyone into the lie that was my life, not even a horse” (78). In the final stage of the marriage the daily training provides a way out of the house. Upon the divorce Georgia acquires a new role: “Georgia was, in a sense, my therapist. For years she listened to my rantings as we tore around the woods. I couldn’t help it. I needed an ear and there they were, two big ones, right in front of me” (87–88). This discourse of therapy and healing is present also intertextually in the text: the narrator reveals that the reading shared by her and her friend Allie consists of a casual selection of popular self-help books such as *“The Road Less Traveled, Men Who Hate Women, or the AA Big Book”* (67).

What Georgia starts Lay Me Down appears to continue. The process in which the narrator saves a suffering horse and develops a deep relationship with it, only to lose her to an incurable disease, appears as a further stage in her therapeutic process and ability to cope with loss. While Georgia functions as a therapist, as an other to whom a story is told, Lay Me Down is a marker of self, abused and betrayed like the narrator: "Watching Lay Me Down and her hostile foal, it was impossible not to connect my own plight with theirs: orphaned, abandoned, mistreated" (49). What such treatment generates is anger, associated by the narrator with her childhood treatment:

I didn't know I was angry until I was about thirty-three. I thought I was just born uncongenial until a therapist suggested I might be reacting to the loss of my parents and being left in the "care" of my grandmother. After that, for years I was nothing but angry. I'd get angry if the phone rang. I'd get angry when the clothes dryer buzzed. I'd get angry when the toaster oven went Ping! (49; emphasis original)

That anger dominates the narrator's life world is evident when the legal owner of Lay Me Down comes to collect the foal with his friend. The text shows Susan's irritation caused by the owner's neglect over the well-being of the horses, which is not a result of lack of financial resources, as his truck and trailer are brand new and spotless: "I didn't want to believe that [...] he'd spent money on a fancy rig but not on food" (59). The two men are represented as Eastern city dwellers, almost as gangsters, whose attitude towards the horses is purely instrumental and thus morally wrong in her view. Read in the context of the narrator's life story, her outburst of anger at the men is not a mere response to their treatment of the horses. Following a moment of screaming, she reflects on the situation: "I felt awful — awful for the foal, awful because I had turned into my grandmother, and awful because Lay Me Down was going to be alone in her pasture that night" (62). Responses such as anger, as well as feelings of shame, are relevant for the therapeutic discourse of the story, demanding the narrator's coming to terms with her past. In other words, Richards's text, like many other autobiographical writings, is involved in what Henke refers to as "the articulation of a haunting and debilitating emotional crisis that, for the author, borders on the unspeakable" (xix).

The subsequent relationship between the narrator and her new horse shows how the narrator learns to counter the past and its formerly silenced experiences of trauma. Similar results concerning the treatment of trauma by developing a close relationship with horses have been reported by practitioners involved in use and development pet-assisted therapy. Burgon's empirical study with young "at-risk" participants

emphasizes such benefits as increase in self-esteem and confidence, as well as the development of empathy and self-efficacy (170–176). In a similar manner, Mallow, Mattel, and Broas report that their subjects emphasized positive experiences from working with and grooming horses on a regular basis: “The women have remarked that they are ‘giving back to the horses’” and “‘understand how they (horses) must feel because they were hurt by someone as well’” (208).

In *Chosen by a Horse* the narrator learns to relate deeply to the animal and then to confront the loss, which contribute to her coping with the past. Since it is difficult to verbalize the past, the narrator’s “unspeakable” feelings are articulated through the horse rather than uttered directly. While the process culminates in Lay Me Down’s inoperable illness and death, it is a part of the narrator’s reconstruction of identity. The following passage shows clearly how the narrator uses the horse to construct a narrative of self and emphasize the depth of the relation between herself and the horse. What she sees in the horse are not merely qualities that are missing in herself. Rather, their significance lies in the fact that Lay Me Down’s response to her troubled past is one that is different from Susan’s way of relating to her experience.

Unlike me, Lay Me Down seemed to feel no rancor. In spite of everything, she was open and trusting of people, qualities I decidedly lacked. It was her capacity to engage that drew me to her, that made me aware of what was possible for me if I had the capacity to ... to what? Forgive? Forget? Live in the moment? What exactly was it that enabled an abused animal, for a lack of a better word, to love again? (64–65)

This comparison between the animal and the human can be addressed in the context of the therapeutic discourse in American popular culture and its perception of self and social relations in particular. Illouz suggests that its function is “to manage various disruptions of biography [...], the uncertainties that have become inherent in postmodern lives, and problems of [...] the ‘size’ of the self, how big or how small one defines oneself” (157). In this sense Richards’s book is part of the same discourse: the animal appears to play a scripted part in assisting the narrator in learning about herself. Her problematic view of herself is evident in her reflection on lack of love: “I often wondered what it was like to be loved like that, to be the recipient of such a grand gesture” (165).

This relationship involves a close bond between the two participants, human and non-human. The strength of the bond is apparent in Lay Me Down's "openly affectionate" and "unusually expressive" "devotion" toward the narrator, involving "quick little grunts" (157) and affectionate behavior: "In the stall she sighed, made eye contact, sniffed my head, my neck, my hands, and let me examine her bad eye without displaying any anxiety" (157). From the perspective of the narrator, the relationship is represented as "unique": "From the beginning, it felt like it was I who had something to learn from her, I who would ultimately benefit from 'saving' her" (158). To stress the affective nature of this relationship, the text foregrounds how bodies, human and non-human, are touched and communicate by doing so. To use the words of Brandt, "The language of the horse operates through the body [...] Because humans cannot convey intentions to horses through spoken language, they too must use their bodies to generate a communication style to which the horse can respond" (301).

In Richards's narrative, however, the body is more than a means of communication, it is also an example of what affect theorists refer to as "embodied subjectivity" (Koivunen 13–14), the way in which bodies function as the loci of affect, or as sites of affect. In Haraway's view, the human-animal relationship, the process of becoming with that shapes an identity of togetherness, starts from touch (35–36). These issues are explored by Richards and can be seen in the following two quotations dealing with the pleasure and warmth of bodily touch. While the first passage speaks of how the human experiences the encounter, the second example seeks to capture the pleasure of the non-human: "She took a deep breath and let a fine mist flubber out of her nostrils and slightly parted lips. I felt it on the back of my neck, her big, wet sigh. I felt it on my heart" (65) and "The harder I brushed, the better she liked it, bobbing her head and leaning into the brush whenever I came to a particularly itchy spot" (147). These moments show mutual recognition and relationality, and also serve to confirm what Natalie Corinne Hansen finds central to "horse stories" in her essay on humans and horses in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. Reading them, she suggests,

in order to examine how human lives are imagined as profoundly shaped through relations with nonhuman lives, opens reading practices to thinking through relationality in terms of locating the self with and through the nonhuman other in the intimacy of desire or in engagements of shared embodiment. (225)

While Lay Me Down is not a therapist, this relationship between the two participants, horse and human, resembles that between a therapist and a client, though with the difference, as suggested by Siporin: “Gestural and body language, implicit in therapist-client relations, is explicit in human-horse communication” (461). In addition, this narrative also involves further passages promoting an identification between the two. An example is the moment when the narrator watches her four horses grazing in pairs, feeling “sad”: “Sometimes a couple grazed so close together their noses touched, and it looked like they were telling secrets [...] the way it felt sometimes when I was around couples at a dinner or a party — shut out of an exclusive club of two” (118). This desire to construct a dyadic relationship with a human being is also a theme that the text addresses in its discussion of Susan’s dating with Hank — if successful, it would reintroduce Susan into conventional middle-class society with the potential promise of a stable sense of identity.

Trauma and Recovery. Yet the representation of the self in Richards’s memoir does not easily emerge as a coherent and fixed one; it is contradictory and split, stemming from a traumatic past. In approaching this, the text again approaches the topic by utilizing the horses of the narrative. It appears that the contrast between the two mares unable to cope with each other reflects the two sides of the narrator’s self. Georgia, the dominant mare who is prone to aggressive attacks and to whom human beings are there to be bossed about (94), is linked with the narrator’s troubled self, the “screaming bitch” shouting at the policeman giving her a ticket for speeding (82). While Georgia is “a monster” (113), only the narrator is allowed to think of her as such. This self, characterized by anger and lack of trust in others, is negotiated by Lay Me Down, “the pet who [...] never bit or scratched or ran away or got mad or did anything but bask in the attention and be a wonderful, affectionate, totally available pet” (46). As a representative of care and forgiveness Lay Me Down helps the narrator towards a new life. Upon facing the impending death of the horse at the equine veterinary clinic at Cornell University the narrator realizes that the emotional burden of her traumatic past extends to her present life and choices. The following passage emphasizes her feelings of “dislocation and isolation” found central to trauma by trauma theorists (Vickroy 23). While the narrator reflects on the loss of her familial bonds and its influence on her later life, she is now able to confront them because of her commitment to Lay Me Down:

I couldn't save myself either, from feeling five years old again, helpless and horrified. I knew that my rage and deep sorrow was thirty-eight years old, preserved perfectly intact, like a buried artefact suddenly exposed to light. My past was more real than ever, more acutely alive in me than ever before. It had taken my love for this sick horse to make me willing to finally face death after all these years, to cry for the first time about the death of my mother and the loss of my family. It had taken me thirty-eight years to not drink or joke or lie about how awful the rest of my childhood been. It was hard to accept that it was mine. All these years I had coped by distancing myself from it, as if it happened to someone else, a child in a story. (205–206)

The moment following the death of Lay Me Down showing the narrator supported by her friends is also important from the perspective of working through the traumatic past, not only as a description of the death of a companion animal. As the novel describes the first sunny day in April when Lay Me Down's life is no longer deemed worth living:

Allie, Dr. Grice, and Donna stayed where they were, kneeling in the grass. Somehow I understood that they weren't going to leave. They would stay for as long as I needed them to stay, absorbing this experience in their own way, but mostly they were there for me, to guide and support me through the death of my horse. No one was going to tell me to stop crying or to be strong or to that I would be OK or that it was just a horse. No one was going to tell me how I should think or feel.

And it was in that gift of silence, that long beautiful pause, that I knew I could hold Lay Me Down's head for as long as I needed to, because no one who surrounded me now would ever pull away. (239)

This passage describes the reconstruction of self, the healing, that the memoir seems to have aimed at. At this stage the narrator has achieved a position that is a combination of autonomous behavior, not directed by others, and relationality, being a member of a community supporting the mourner. In so doing the passage restores what trauma has taken away from her, a sense of oneself as "decent, strong, and autonomous" (23). And, more significantly, this community allows the narrator to mourn for the passing of a non-human member of the community — it is not "just a horse" (239), but a creature with whom she has enjoyed a mutually and emotionally fulfilling relationship. The passage raises the need to address Susan's mourning for her non-human companion. On the basis Kari Weil's discussion of responses to animal death, in such situations

mourning and melancholia may function as one's "refusal to subscribe to the law of sex or species, to erase boundaries between kin and kind, pet and lover" (110) and thus may contribute to the formation of a new identity. Alternatively, the issue can be examined on the basis of the view presented by Haraway, who suggests that life forms are intricately intertwined and that their identities cannot be separated ("Every species is a multispecies crowd" [165]). In this context Susan has become with Lay Me Down, formed an identity that demands the horse as a part of the self. As Haraway puts it: "Partners do not preexist their relating; the partners are precisely what come out of the inter- and intra-relating of fleshly, significant, semiotic-material being" (165).

The special status of the narrator's relationship with Lay Me Down is stressed in the text. For instance, it is seen in the transformation of her view of illness and death, where the former fear of loss becomes an acceptance: "I had thought I would prepare for her death by pulling back, withholding my feelings, or even euthanizing her before any symptoms developed. Instead, I spent more time with her" (147). To show the similarities and connections between the various losses, the deaths of Lay Me Down and the narrator's mother are pulled together when Hotspot, Lay Me Down's devoted grazing partner and protector, finds her dead, panics and grieves. For the narrator, Hotspot's response is an echo of her own formerly unarticulated grief:

His grief was beautiful and ferocious; his whole body shuddered with the thrust of each call. I stayed near him, close enough to feel his whinnies reverberate in my chest, as if they were mine. It was as if at last my grief, too, had the power to shake the ground and shatter the air between me and my beloved. It was as if my grief had finally found a memory, a voice. *It took two nurses to pull you away from her.* (246; emphasis original)

The idea of relationality and the possibility of reconstructing intimacy appear to be at the center of *Chosen by a Horse*. Their significance is evident in the text's parallel narrative in which the narrator reflects on the development of her (unsuccessful) relationship with Hank, a former writer and a businessman who is allergic to horses. This story, revealing her insecurity and avoidance of emotional intimacy, is similarly rooted in her experiences in childhood and marriage, which she now feels determined to counter. The narrative includes various passages in which the narrator reflects on her ability to love "that way": "I wondered if something was wrong with me, if I was one of

those people incapable of intimacy. It would have made sense if I was, but I didn't want to be" (95). Before setting out for dinner with the recent divorcé Hank, she says: "I don't think men do this, reevaluate their lives, starting from birth, before going out to dinner with a woman" (119). This narrative, while focusing on human-human relations, is linked with that addressing human-horse relations: both are part of the therapeutic discourse through which the narrator seeks to negotiate her distance from others. As the narrative emphasizes the role of childhood trauma as a source of the narrator's reluctance, the results of her working through point to a possibility of entering such relations in later life, or at least of no longer being a prisoner of anger and rage. This is evident in her thoughts when they decide to separate: "I leaned back against the booth, suddenly too tired to feel angry anymore, too tired to hate him. It wasn't Hank I'd miss, or a warm body to hold, not really" (244). Here the symbolic role given to the letter H in the narrative in joining the disparate parts of the narrative together should be addressed: the letter H is, in addition to Hank and the verb hate mentioned in the quotation, present in several episodes in the book. These include the narrator's grandmother's maiden name, Hartshorne, and the initials on the buttons on the liveries of the family coachmen (3), the hospital at Cornell where Lay Me Down is treated is in the shape of the letter H (199), and the set of words that appears to describe the novel and its thematic – the title includes the words horse and heart, and it centers upon the notions of hurt and healing.

Conclusion. In this essay I have examined the representation of the strong affective bond between the narrator of Richard's text and her horses. By emphasizing the special character of Lay Me Down and the transformation it triggers in the narrator, *Chosen by a Horse* voices the increasingly powerful role of companion animals in human lives and underlines their significance in late modern society. The description of the affective and embodied relationship, seen in the bodily and non-verbal communication between humans and non-humans, also shows the extent to which companion animals are more than pets and objects. Rather, the strong sense of relationality shapes both participants and constructs their relationship as one that exceeds the boundaries of species, showing how identity is a question of becoming with, not alone or individualistically, as suggested by Haraway. As Susan's narrative shows, her life is transformed because of her strong bonds with horses and the emotional security that they provide.

However, the location of Richards's work in contemporary popular American therapeutic discourse mars its boundary-breaking powers to some extent. By linking the moving death of the horse to the other traumatizing events in the narrator's life course, it imagines the companion animal in a way that makes it appear more as a catalyst than

as an agent, and thus represents it as an instrument necessary to the “healing” of the narrator. Such representation is rooted in the way in which *Chosen by a Horse* follows the generic conventions of the therapeutic narrative as defined by Illouz: it seeks to “organize the self in a consistent way by finding the causes of a deficient relationship in a repressed or forgotten past” (176). As the emotional problems of the narrator of *Chosen by a Horse* are framed in the framework of her life story, it centers therapy and sees it as a naturalized way towards a better and more enjoyable life — strong bonds with animals are one of the many cures. In this sense the narrative, regardless of the emotional link between humans and non-humans, appears to conform to the demands of the therapeutic discourse as applied in popular narratives and self-help literature rather than to transform them. While the memoir, unlike many other animal-oriented autobiographical and therapeutic texts, is to some extent able to resist the desire to “colonize” the animal as seen in its attempt to portray the close relationality between humans and animals, in the end it remains human-centric as seen in its emphasis on the meaning of the animal for the human participant.

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