

Erica Tom

Gender and Power in Narratives of “Natural Horsemanship”: The Production of “Prey-Identified Masculinity”

1. Overview. Through visual and textual analysis, this cultural studies project examines the production of what I call “prey-identified masculinity” — a discourse of masculinity where the performer identifies with prey as a means to explain his empathy and sensitivity, while remaining in a dominant subject position. Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, I evaluate the ideologies and discourse being produced through two cultural artifacts concerning “Natural Horsemanship” practitioners Monty Roberts and Buck Brannaman — the autobiography, *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (1996), and the biographic documentary *Buck* (2010). This analysis seeks to add to the developing field of horse-human relations, specifically the scholarship on Natural Horsemanship by Lynda Birke, Keri Brandt, and Joanna Latimer. By focusing on cultural productions (rather than the practice of the discipline) this article seeks to contribute to literature on “the representation of equestrian sports in the media” of which there is, “a striking dearth of research specifically on gendered representations of equestrians in media coverage” (Adelman and Knijnik 207).¹ Positing that prey-identified masculinity offers a new identity that may provide a sense of agency to a specific population, I also consider the pitfalls of a discourse that is grounded in sexist ideology. This analysis is concerned with the social power relations of performativity, how cultural narratives structure identities, and what is at stake in the production of prey-identified masculinity.²

2. Introduction to “Natural Horsemanship.” Natural Horsemanship is a discipline and a term that, in and of itself, causes passionate debate across varied communities of equestrians.³ Referred to as a “revolution” by some in the equine world, horsewomen and horsemen argue for and against the so-called natural methods employed by its practitioners.⁴ While some horse trainers claim status as Natural Horsemanship experts, others who may be widely included in the category decry the falsehood of the phrase itself. Tom Dorrance, who is thought to be the founder of Natural Horsemanship, authored *True Unity: Willing Communication Between Horse and Human* (1987); young trainers refer to Dorrance as “the patron saint of horses.”⁵ Ray Hunt, a student of Dorrance, famously opened all his clinics with the assertion, “I’m here for the horse — to help him get a better deal” (Miller and Lamb 32). Dorrance and Hunt are well

respected for their philosophies of working for the horse, but it is with contention that they are framed as the original proponents of Natural Horsemanship.⁶

I originally became interested in understanding Natural Horsemanship while I was working at a non-profit mustang rescue in 2007. Our primary responsibility was to acclimate the yearlings to human contact, and to start the three-year-olds under saddle (to be ridden). The director of the program organized a few visits from a Natural Horsemanship practitioner.⁷ While I drew on some elements of the trainer's work, I did not identify as a follower of Natural Horsemanship. What I may have taken for granted as a young equestrian was the idea that horsemanship was about engendering a harmonious relationship between horse and rider; I assumed this was what all equestrians desired to achieve with their equine partners. However, despite the Ancient Greek treatise *On Horsemanship* by Xenophon, which encourages equestrians to be gentle and understanding with their steeds, violent domination of horses has continued over time. The publication of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1887), recognized as the first fictional work on animal rights, demonstrated the need for reform in 19th century England, and current debates over the cruel use of horse tack in dressage reveal that domination of horses still exists. Certainly, the efforts of horse trainers such as Dorrance and Hunt to move the conversation from domination to concepts of connection, or control, have been important.⁸ Notwithstanding the "better deal" horses may be getting, it is evident that equines remain at the mercy of humans. Many Natural Horsemanship methods of gaining cooperation of the horse employ psychological coercion over physical force. Resonant with the way in which Foucault theorizes "docile bodies" are produced in modern society through surveillance, domesticated horses become docile not by beatings, but through the non-physical force of the human embodying surveillance within an enclosed space. Though the focus of this article is the discourse and not the training methods, a brief description of Natural Horsemanship outside of its historical development is useful here.

Methods and approaches of Natural Horsemanship vary widely depending on the trainer and specific equestrian subculture — there are nonetheless some basic tenets and practices. Natural Horsemanship practitioners believe in harmony between horse and rider, gained through communication and trust rather than physical violence. They base their paralinguistic practices on ethology. Many trainers, including Roberts, describe learning about horse communication by watching wild herds; these trainers then translate this equine language into a set of communicative practices for humans to employ in horse training. One popular method of training is to work with the horse in a pen, arena, or pasture without the use of a halter, lunge line, or any other piece of tack

— the human acts like the dominant horse, controlling the horse by embodying dominant horse behavior.⁹ The goal is to get the horse to accept the human as the leader. Roberts’s version of this practice is called “Join Up,” and has received some criticism, mainly that it is psychologically stressful for the horse. Roberts has addressed critics by conducting stress tests on horses he works with to argue that the horses do not experience psychological distress due to his methods.¹⁰ There are many other versions of the Natural Horsemanship method. One other popular approach is “Liberty Work.”¹¹ Although the controversy over the methods of this “revolution” and the impact on horses warrants further investigation, it is beyond the scope of this project.

Debates over the philosophical approaches to working and being with horses, and empirical research on human-horse relations are important; however, as sociolinguist Cheri Kramare argues, because language is a powerful tool of “shaping — and distorting — our perceptions of individuals” (21) and the world in which we live, it is likewise essential to understand what current media productions emerging from and about the equine world reveal about culture. The language of these cultural productions is important because, “language is not a substitute for action, but is itself action” (22). That is, as Althusser theorizes in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” discourses serve to mediate relations of power in society. Thus, all language is political. In this article, I seek to illuminate the function of the discourse prey-identified masculinity created in cultural productions concerning Natural Horsemanship. Birke has demonstrated how the discourse of Natural Horsemanship functions to create a sense of community for equestrians who participate in the discipline, by starkly contrasting how they think of and treat their horses against those who practice “traditional horsemanship.”¹² This project is likewise concerned with the discourse of Natural Horsemanship, but moves from focusing on how it works for the followers to those who are at the forefront, the practitioners. It is important to note that despite the fact that women make up the majority of equestrians worldwide — over 80% in the US — the leaders of Natural Horsemanship are overwhelmingly men.¹³ Through analysis of two cultural artifacts concerning Natural Horsemanship practitioners Roberts and Brannaman, I demonstrate how their performance of prey-identified masculinity serves to bolster their leadership positions at the head of primarily female followings.

3. Natural Horsemanship in Popular Culture. Roberts and Brannaman are not only horse trainers, but also the main figures of cultural productions with cross-over appeal to non-equestrians.¹⁴ Each was involved in film and television as children; Roberts was

a stunt rider for various films, and Brannaman and his brother were the “Kellogg’s Sugar Pops kids” — shoving their cherubic smiling faces with Pops, the sweet corn cereal in television commercials (Roberts, Meehl 11:23-12:51). *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (1996), a biographical sketch of how Roberts developed his training methods, spent weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, in addition to being an international bestseller. The recent biographical film *Buck* (2010) centers on Brannaman’s life on the road conducting horse training clinics, and earned various awards from independent film festivals, including Sundance. Researching his book *The Horse Whisperer*, Nicholas Evans interviewed both Roberts and Brannaman. Robert Redford credits Brannaman as an essential contributor to the film adaptation — particularly inspiring the “humanity and gentleness of spirit” which Redford enacted in his portrayal of the main character, Tom Booker, bringing a gentle cowboy to the big screen, and into living rooms across America (Meehl 25:38-30:07).¹⁵

In the film *The Horse Whisperer*, Booker is a horseman with emotional scars. His damage differs from that of Roberts’s and Brannaman’s: Booker’s emotional scars are left by a woman who chose city life over a life with him. The audience comes upon Tom at his family’s ranch, seemingly recovered from his lost love through his continued dedication to a pastoral existence. But trouble comes in the form of a cold and successful city woman, Annie Maclean, who brings him the challenge of a broken-spirited daughter, Grace, and her damaged horse, Pilgrim. Annie brings the challenge of romance as well. Developed in consultation with Brannaman, Redford employs a gentle masculinity for Tom. He rarely lifts his voice or speaks at all, his eyes shift from downcast to searching; he often simply stands, waiting for both the horse and the daughter to come to him, quiet and docile. Employing many of the western genre’s tropes, the cowboy’s silence is potent. In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins draws on Octavio Paz’s definition of the *macho* as a being who is closed up — to speak is to become vulnerable, to speak is to become feminized, and therefore not to speak is to control one’s ability to be known, is to enact masculinity (56). The movement of the camera, spanning the distances between his body and theirs evokes the almost mystical power that Tom embodies. Annie too is drawn to his seemingly immutable strength and sensitivity (despite the numerous times Tom simply ignores her presence and questions), for as Tompkins reminds us, women are inevitably drawn to these men. Tom and Annie’s romance stops short when her husband, Robert, joins them at the ranch. And in the end, Tom is left hurt once more, as Annie returns to New York to be with her daughter and stay in her marriage. Though the plot is fueled by a forbidden romance, the magical power of Tom to draw beings toward him is central.

The mystical quality of Tom is in part constructed through Annie's research of horse training. In a montage of Annie poring over books, magazines, and websites, her voice-over gives a brief history of the relationship of horse and human: having once captured the horse for its meat, humans would always have a fraught relationship with the animal. After this gloss of the tension between horse and man, Annie comes across an article on Tom, who is framed as a special man, of magnetic powers. The spread of Natural Horsemanship through the media in *The Horse Whisperer* mimics the course of the discipline in real life. In October of 1993, *The New York Times* told the story of the emergence of a "new" style of gentling horses in Dirk Johnson's article entitled, "Broncobusters Try New Tack: Tenderness." Whether Redford did so purposefully or not in his film, he brought forth Natural Horsemanship in the same manner it was being presented in print and by word of mouth — as something new and magical, as something beautiful brought forth by a certain kind of man.¹⁶

In "Broncobusters," Johnson reports from Greybull, Wyoming, with an opening worth quoting at length:

At high noon in a crook of the Bighorn Mountains, the sorrel danced nervously inside the corral, as a lanky cowboy moved in to start breaking the colt, a practice as old as the Old West. But this cowboy wore no spurs on his boots. He did not bark at the horse to show who was boss. He did not sneak around to throw a saddle on its back to climb aboard until it stopped bucking. Instead, he offered an outstretched hand, let the horse sniff it, and then gently stroked its neck and back. "It's O.K. son," the blue-eyed cowboy, Tim Flitner, whispered to the bronc. (A13)

The blue-eyed cowboy describes the tension between the old ways of most Wyoming horsemen and a new generation that prefers methods of gentling rather than breaking horses. He tells his friends that he gave himself a "macho-ectomy." This article illustrates how methods perceived as new are taking hold, even in communities where loyalty to tradition is strong. Flitner's sensitive masculinity is produced as much by his current methods of gentling horses as it is by speaking of his past use of coarser methods. Such an admission heightens his cowboy authenticity — and through the reflection and change to kinder methods, his sensitivity as well. The admission is essential to the gentle cowboy identity, as the sensitive nature of his current masculine performance is situated against past coarser performances. As Judith Butler states in

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Gender Trouble, "Identity is performativity constituted by the everyday 'expressions' that are said to be its results," and the everyday expressions here are both current actions and reflective narration that create context, impacting how his performances are read (24-25). Just a few years after "Broncobusters Try New Tack," Evans began writing *The Horse Whisperer* and Redford began employing the gentle methods of Brannaman for the film production. In this film and the two texts featuring Roberts and Brannaman analyzed in this article, I argue that a particular brand of masculinity is being produced.

4. Production Patterns: Prey-Identified Masculinity in Natural Horsemanship. To adequately analyze the narratives of these two Natural Horsemanship trainers, I will first demonstrate how the discourse of Natural Horsemanship is built upon a

Human (Predator)

Horse (Prey)

binary hierarchy. I do not posit that all males act as predators, nor do I believe that females cannot in fact be predatory. However, the quotidian illustrations of the females' locality as prey — in statistics of rapes by men against women — reveal how the discursive binaries of

Male (Predator)

Female (Prey)

are put into practice. Male (as predator) over female (as prey) serves as the foundation from which the equine training discipline, Natural Horsemanship, builds its philosophy; and it is most evident in the narratives of two leading horse trainers of this subculture, Roberts and Brannaman.

Gender essentialism is central to this philosophical framework. Females are *gentle* and males are *rough*. Women are understood as having a natural connection to horses, as in essentialist discourse they are conflated with earth and non-human animals. Nikki Savvides demonstrates the dangers of such ideas in her essay, "'Loving-knowing' women and horses: Symbolic connections, real life conflicts and 'natural horsemanship.'" Explaining why the idea that women are naturally connected to, and

in harmony with, horses is problematic, Savvides argues that the abundant literary production of narratives that perpetuate such beliefs create dangerous situations for both women and horses. For example, a novice rider may attempt an advanced jump with her horse because she believes she has a natural connection that will allow her to succeed without adequate training and practice. Alternatively, within this discourse of gender essentialism there is also a danger for men — bereft of belief in men's empathetic capacity, what options do men have for seeking connection and harmony? Men are conceived of as having a natural desire to dominate; this is manifested by the utilization of equestrian tools such as ropes, whips, spurs and chains to subjugate the horse. Steeped in the essentialist binary construction,

Man

Woman-Earth-Animal

the discourse of Natural Horsemanship, as produced in *The Man Who Listens to Horses* and *Buck*, relies on gender essentialism to produce the alterior masculinity of the gentle cowboy — a *prey-identified masculinity*. Prey-identified masculinity is a discourse of masculinity in which the performer identifies with prey as a means to explain his empathy and sensitivity while remaining in a dominant subject position. Important to the construction of this identity performance is the assumed violence of mainstream conceptions of men and a narrow view of all traditional horse training as violent. As Birke illustrates in her article “Learning to Speak Horse” this discipline's followers, “establish an oppositional discourse, roundly rejecting anything they [see] as belonging to the conventional world of equestrian culture” (222). This oppositional discourse in terms of training methods is central in the narratives of Roberts and Brannaman, but further, the oppositional constructions of gender (particularly with Roberts, and less so with Brannaman) and species are imperative as well.¹⁷

In *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, Roberts describes his father's violent methods of “breaking” horses. He elaborates upon a traditional breaking technique where the horse is tied to a thick pole and left to stand for hours, sometimes hobbled (one leg tied up, suspending it from the ground). The horse is later “sacked out”: a saddle blanket, or other item, is whipped over the horse's entire body and a saddle is then strapped on. Quick movements around and against the horse with unknown objects can be

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frightening and result in extreme stress and agitation. Roberts writes that his father does all of these things and much worse. He chronicles the use of whips, spurs, and even chains. Roberts describes the pain he felt witnessing this treatment. He writes about his relationship to one of his first horses, Brownie, and how he tried to make up for past wrongs with kindness.¹⁸ Developing his own training method, he calls it “starting” as opposed to breaking. Roberts’s empathy is constructed against — constitutive with — the belligerent masculinity of his father, a man whom readers are seemingly supposed to accept as a stand-in for widely accepted notions of masculinity as fraught with physicality and violence.

The beatings Roberts experienced by his father are framed as a direct result of Roberts’s gentleness. His father believed that horses only understood fear, “If you did not hurt them first, they would hurt you” (11). Once, after demonstrating some of his own nonviolent horse training methods, Roberts was beaten for deviating from his father’s instructions. Roberts remembers, “the iron grip of his [father’s] left hand on [his] upper arms as he used his right hand to wield the chain” (55 - 56). This incident instilled in Roberts the knowledge that if he were to show his own will, his father would beat the spirit out of him in the same fashion he did the horses he broke. Roberts reflects, “I felt the same anger and sense of failure that the horse must have felt. A lesson in how not to win respect and allegiance, it only enforced a reluctant obedience, instilled by fear, and left me with a lifelong sense of resentment” (55 -56). It should be noted here that the veracity of Roberts’s story has been challenged by his sister and aunt, who put together a collection of evidence that contradicts the violent image of his father, as well as his experience with horses in *Horse Whispers and Lies*. They frame Roberts as a man who chose fame over truth. However, by writing his popular autobiography, Roberts wields considerable control over the construction of his life’s narrative — the story of how he came to train horses through performances of prey-identified masculinity. While it is important to acknowledge the contradiction put forth by Roberts’s family members, the purpose of this project is not to determine the veracity of the narratives of Roberts and Brannaman, but rather to examine how their stories function as cultural productions.

A similar narrative — of abuse that engenders empathy — is produced in the film *Buck*, which follows Brannaman to various horse training clinics across America. Early in the film, Brannaman speaks about the foundation of his career as a trainer. The audience hears his voice over, low and gruff. The audience sees Brannaman moving deliberately. He grooms and then leads a horse across a green open field,

Horses are my life ... and because of some of the things I went through as a kid I found some safety and some companionship in the horses. And uh, I was just looking for a peaceful place to be, where I wasn't threatened, or my life wasn't threatened. So. I have an empathy for horses that ... when something is scared for their life I understand that. (2:38-3:11)

The “things” Brannaman went through as a child were beatings and emotional abuse from his father. Meehl, the director, edits in Brannaman’s narration of a cold snowy evening when he had reached his limit for abuse (13:36-15:03). His father was drunk, and before he could beat him, Brannaman fled the house, out into the freezing weather. As his voice leads the viewer, the film moves slowly through black and white photographs: the darkened windows of a house, light on the porch creating a chiaroscuro of grey and black and white across a snow-covered yard, and then the face of the family dog, white flakes on his snout, eyes peering into the camera. That night, Brannaman slept outside beside his canine companion, curled inside the doghouse to guard against the freezing temperatures — a real and symbolic alignment with creatures dominated by men.

Because Roberts’s and Brannaman’s narratives of victimization ostensibly allow them to understand the position of subordinates, they align themselves with “animals of prey” — women, and horses. Their victimization echoes strongly throughout the two main texts examined here; Roberts overtly utilizes the narrative to align his work, and himself, with women. Declaring that women are generally more accepting of non-violent methods, and because women and horses are both vulnerable creatures, Roberts states that the horse, “is a flight animal who feels vulnerability twenty-four hours a day. It’s the same vulnerability that a woman may feel when she’s alone in an elevator and a burly man gets on”(xxvii). Brannaman’s alignment with women is less explicit. He situates himself with horses explaining, “I have an empathy for horses that ... when something is scared for their life I understand that” (2:38-3:11). Pairing this understanding with metaphors of the horse as child and as woman, Brannaman’s discourse likewise becomes based in gender essentialism. These biographical productions produce the discourse of prey-identified masculinity, embodied in narratives constructed of language and visuals — which I will further demonstrate are made effective through power relations of race, gender, physicality, and sexual prowess. While these men are able to embody prey-identified masculinity effectively to gain a sense of agency, as Chris Weedon explains, “the wide range of identities

available in a society and the modes of subjectivity that go with them are not open to all people at all times ... non-recognition and non-identification leaves the individual in an abject state of non-subjectivity and lack of agency." Thus, I will also examine the limitations of this discourse (7).¹⁹

5. Unquestionably Cowboy: Race, Gender, and Sexual Prowess. The fabrication of the American cowboy is a powerful construction constituted by a particular brand of masculinity, which is important to the construction of prey-identified masculinity. As James W. Chesebro suggests, "masculinity is profoundly and ultimately a communication concept, a socially and symbolically constructed notion, that every culture and every era revisits and redefines in different ways" (36).²⁰ The symbolic importance of the cowboy goes beyond the U.S. As Elizabeth Atwood-Lawrence has argued, the cowboy is a "complex figure who partakes of both the reality of the rugged life he lived on the frontier and of the myth that has grown up around it, it is he who has captured the imagination of the world" (4).²¹ Tracey Owens Patton and Sally M. Schedlock explain that the cowboy, as part of the myth of the West, "has lived in the minds of Americans and across the ocean in Europe for generations" (4).²² They contend that cultural productions, like Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* (1902) — the quintessential western novel, depicting the life and character of a cowboy on a ranch in Wyoming — contribute to the construction of the white cowboy. The gender and racial diversity that was present in Westward expansion was written out of *The Virginian*, and instead non-whites and women are erased, and a simplified version becomes myth, in which the white cowboy rides alone — a rugged and revered individual. The identities of Roberts and Brannaman are produced with, and build upon, such mythologies.

Roberts and Brannaman are able to wield a sensitive masculinity without engendering critiques of their manliness due to their alignment with the cowboy myth, which includes their race and traditionally masculine bodies. As one of Brannaman's friends professes, "He's built to fit a horse. God had him in mind when he made a cowboy" (Meehl 25:08-25:25). Such language naturalizes the image of the white cowboy — a figure that was constructed and fixed through Wister's "literary creation of the archetypal horseman of the Plains, Frederick Remington with his painstaking artistic depictions of ranger life, and Theodore Roosevelt with his characterization of ranching as an invigorating and adventuresome life" (Atwood-Lawrence 25). Standing tall and broad shouldered, Brannaman and Roberts are phenotypically classic American cowboys. In line with this classic visual, they read as white, which further solidifies their manliness. As Reeser posits, white masculinity's power is upheld in its contrast to the construction of other racial masculinities.²³ Asian masculinity is viewed as weak and

un-intimidating, whereas black masculinity is viewed as excessive and dangerous — white masculinity is the ideal masculinity. Roberts refers to his Native American grandmother; however in this instance, this non-white heritage bolsters his connection with horses, due to the stereotype of Native Americans as naturally in tune with the earth and animals.

The importance of Roberts's and Brannaman's bodies are evident in a turn to the visuals of the book and film. The film poster shows Brannaman against a background of horses. The horses are not depicted as individuals; rather, as a flow of flesh, mane and tail, they are rendered as a landscape against which the cowboy is foregrounded.²⁴ Brannaman's eyes are hidden by his downturned cowboy hat, invoking the mystery of the western wrangler. His hat and shoulders are the most prominent elements. One of Roberts's book covers parallels this film poster — the mysterious man amid a flow of horse flesh — but two other covers deviate from this formula. In one, Roberts stands beside a prized horse, and in the other, beside Queen Elizabeth II (who has been a great supporter of Roberts). However, in these visuals that deviate from the traditional formula, Roberts's whole body is presented: his body is central to the identity production. Further, beyond Roberts's and Brannaman's build and race, I posit that their physicality is made central through the discussion of physical acts — despite *Natural Horsemanship's* emphasis on embodied communication over physical force —, specifically their participation in rodeo and other traditional western displays of physical prowess and mastery over animals.

Atwood-Lawrence argues that “rodeo embodies the frontier spirit as manifested through the aggressive and exploitative conquest of the West ... it supports the value of subjugating nature, and reenacts the ‘taming’ process whereby the wild is brought under control” (7). This perpetuation of the frontier spirit expresses how Americans interpret the past, but also the present (10). Rodeo perpetuates the values of the rugged and stoic cowboy (apart from women) and the importance of the challenge continually to bring that which is uncivilized under control, whether it be women, animals, or land. Patton and Schedlock state that, “No other sport, other than baseball, is so closely linked to the ideals, myth and traditions of the West as rodeo” (4). The constructed identities of Roberts and Brannaman each draw on the symbolism of rodeo. Roberts was a bulldogger, and Brannaman participates in rodeo styled events such as the Californios, a competition featuring events based on working activities of real cowboys and ranch hands.

Roberts describes the cruelty of steer wrestling, also referred to as bulldogging — but not before he describes his mastery as a bulldogger.²⁵ Like the cowboy Johnson interviews in “Broncobusters Try New Tack: Tenderness,” men who perform a sensitive masculinity must confess their past of coarse or brutal acts as proof of their current contemplative natures. Atwood-Lawrence explains the event, “A bulldogger enters the arena mounted, must leap from his horse at top speed, grab one horn and the jaw of the running steer, stop him, and then throw the animal flat on its side or its back with all four feet and head straight. Time is called at the moment when this is accomplished, and a score of ten seconds or better is ordinarily needed to win” (Atwood-Lawrence 34). Not only do the human participants risk injury and even death, but both horse and steer are put in danger with the high impact of the sport. Roberts elaborates upon his excellence and mastery of the sport, listing his awards, while also expressing regret for his participation and rebuking the activity for the injuries and even deaths of both steer and men. These contests are physically demanding and extremely dangerous, attracting men who must not only be strong, but also have a desire to “prove their physical prowess” (Atwood-Lawrence 87). It is not surprising perhaps that a man whose masculinity was perpetually questioned by his father through censure and beatings would find a sense of self by excelling in an activity where “stoicism is a prime requisite” (87). Roberts’s description of being a bulldogger solidifies his traditional masculinity — and his later censure of bulldogging serves to construct him as thoughtful and sensitive enough to recognize his past wrongs. This narrative cements his manliness; it heightens his authenticity as a cowboy.

While Brannaman’s career as a trick roper and wrangler is less obviously coarse or violent than that of a steer wrestler, it functions toward the same end. Beyond his solo performances of trick roping mastery, he participates in traditional roping and herding events where treatment of cattle is controversial. Amid urgings for the horse to be treated with empathy and respect in the film, working cattle (in which cattle are shown frantically attempting to rejoin their herd while the horse and rider keep it segregated) is nonchalantly accepted (53:00-54:41). Brannaman’s roping is less about the kind of physicality Roberts’s event enacts, yet it is linked with other issues related to masculinity in the film. One scene shows Brannaman doing rope tricks amidst a circle of admirers. Jokingly, Brannaman smiles — “this is the move I did for Mary when I was trying to trap her” (47:35-48:49). His cowboy skills becomes a masculine move to “trap” a woman, playful yet adding to the common conflation of women with animals of prey. At another moment in the film, while Brannaman is overseeing the starting of a colt, his masculine knowledge concerning women emerges as part of his equine advice. When

the rider and colt appear to be moving harmoniously in the round pen, Brannaman tells the rider how to end the day's session:

Where you end up your ride on a horse is so important ... it's a little bit like you guys, when you were young and you were dating. That last two minutes of the dates can be a real deal breaker. [A man astride a horse bends over at the waist, smiling and laughing] With these horses it's the same thing. You gotta end on a good note. (46:37-47:19)

As Brannaman finishes this comparison between horses and women, the camera pans to a shot of Mary (Brannaman's wife) and Reata (their youngest daughter). Blonde, beautiful by American standards, their smiling images are placed perfectly as proof of Brannaman's male prowess. Similarly, Roberts's own masculinity is marked by his ability to "trap" an attractive woman.

He tells the story of meeting Pat, and how they eventually married, eventually having several children. Telling the story of their romance, Roberts details his work on the film *East of Eden* (1955). He describes how the director paired him with James Dean, so that Dean could learn to be a real cowboy from Roberts. Brannaman helped Dean buy the right kind of clothes, the right kind of boots, and narrates what seems to be a keen friendship between the two. Further, Roberts states, "[Dean] fell in love with Pat and followed her around like a puppy" (122). Such a claim positions Pat as a desirable woman, and highlights Roberts's masculine competence in retaining her allegiance in the face of the heartthrob's affection. These references to Roberts's and Brannaman's masculine prowess in romantic and sexual terms, their traditionally masculine physiques by American standards, and the stories of their childhood paternal abuse work together to create narratives of the two men as having morally earned positions of authority from which to speak about the power dynamics of people and horses.

6. Conclusion: Agency, Access, and the Need for New Narratives. In these stories, Roberts and Brannaman perform prey-identified masculinity — a discursive move that transforms their past abuses into sources of agency — positioning them as knowledgeable leaders of "prey animals": horses, and the women that make up the majority of equestrians. Though this performance empowers these two men, it is, as I have demonstrated in this article, specifically linked to the gender, race, and sexuality of Roberts and Brannaman. As Weedon explains, all identities are not available to all

people (7). Prey-identified masculinity is not available to the primarily female following of Natural Horsemanship because of its very hierarchical logic. A person must be identified first as a predator (male, and often white) for a performance of prey to engender empathy; women performing as prey merely re-inscribes the gender binary that appears inescapable — a binary demonstrated in Savvides's work, which analyzes the impact of the myth of horse and woman as naturally connected and similar. I illuminate the function of prey-identified masculinity as one of the ways in which men continue to be positioned as authorities in the horse industry — despite the fact that equestrians are primarily women — so that we might consider how discursive practices in Natural Horsemanship not only reflect but create culture.²⁶ Furthermore, this article encourages readers to imagine discursive practices that empower women not only to connect with horses, but also to be positioned as leaders in the horse industry. Imagine a landscape beyond the gender essentialist myths of women and horses. Imagine what kinds of stories we might tell. Imagine a cowgirl riding off into the sunset.²⁷

Notes

1. See Miriam Adelman and Jorge Knijnik's edited collection *Gender and Equestrian Sport: Riding Around the World*. While some might wonder if focusing on cultural productions concerning Natural Horsemanship constitutes study of an equestrian sport, the growth and spread of Natural Horsemanship practitioners work across equestrian sports, including with Dressage riders and in the Racing industry — as demonstrated in the two cultural productions this article analyzes — is ample proof of its importance, and therefore is worthy of scholarly attention. For the scope of this article, and due to Natural Horsemanship's origins in the US, in addition to the fact that these artifacts are produced within the US, this article focuses on gender performance in America. However, work looking at how Natural Horsemanship has been disseminated beyond the US is important. Lynda Birke's and Nikki Savvides's work has focused on equestrian communities in the UK and Australia, respectively. Comparative worldwide analysis of the discipline of Natural Horsemanship may further enhance our understanding of this discipline and its implications for horses and humans.

2. Chris Weedon's book *Identity and Culture* has been essential in developing my theoretical approach to Natural Horsemanship and the cultural artifacts examined in this article.

3. The term Natural Horsemanship is of course sexist in that it that it uses “man” to refer to all people; however, I use it here for consistency and because it is the language used in this subculture.

4. In their book *The Revolution in Horsemanship and What it Means to Mankind*, Robert M. Miller and Rick Lamb claim that in the last few decades of the twentieth century the discipline of Natural Horsemanship, with the core tenet “that horses can be controlled more effectively without the use of force,” remarkably improved the relationship between humans and horses (3). Lynda Birke, in her essay, “Learning to Speak Horse’: The Culture of Natural Horsemanship” notes the controversies within and beyond the culture. She writes, “Not surprisingly, there are a myriad of different methods used, while groups of enthusiasts and trainers form and reform, split, and create counter-groups” (221).

5. See Johnson.

6. While it is widely thought that current Natural Horsemanship practitioners are drawing on the philosophies of Dorrance and Hunt, as stated in Miller and Lamb’s popular book *The Revolution in Horsemanship and What it Means for Mankind*, there are those within the equestrian world who feel that Dorrance and Hunt would be displeased with the majority of what is called Natural Horsemanship.

7. I do not identify as a professional horse trainer, rather I have benefited from a wide range of experiences working and being with horses in, and for, a myriad of disciplines and purposes: as a young leisure rider, as a competitor on the University of Washington’s Intercollegiate Equestrian team, as an assistant trainer at a mustang rescue, as an exercise rider working with ex-race horses, as a handler at Breed Shows, as an apprentice to a Dressage Trainer, as a ranch hand rehabilitating injured horses, as a program developer for Equine Guided Education workshops, and currently as a participant-observer conducting an ethnography with the Newark Mounted Police.

8. I am grateful to scholar Gala Argent for her critique of an early presentation of the project, during a panel at the 2013 Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts Conference.

9. See Tom and Katz for an in-depth description of this method.

10. See Fowler, Kennedy, and Marlin.

11. A search for “Horse Liberty Work” on the search engine Google, or on Youtube reveals innumerable website and videos of humans doing work “at liberty” with horses. See Robin Gates's website: <http://www.libertyhorsetraining.com>.

12. Lynda Birke's articles “Learning to Speak Horse’: The Culture of ‘Natural Horsemanship’” and “Talking about Horses: Control and Freedom in the World of ‘Natural Horsemanship’” examine the rise of Natural Horsemanship, the cultural shift within the equestrian world, and explore how horses are represented within the discourses of Natural Horsemanship respectively.

13. See Birke and Brandt, and also Adelman and Knijnik, who provide world-wide statistics on the growth of women's participation in the horse industry (4).

14. While I examine the similarities produced in *The Man Who Listens to Horses and Buck*, I am not examining these real life men — nor do I posit that these men are necessarily similar beyond what I illuminate in the productions, or that they would align themselves. Further, while Roberts is involved in the production of his biography, it is important to note that Brannaman is the subject and not the creator of the film.

15. For a contradiction of the stereotype of the cowboy in mainstream media see Gretel Erlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*. In her chapter *On Men*, Erlich describes the intricacies of the men she has come to know living in Wyoming. She explains that these men are “an odd mixture of physical vigor and maternalism” (50). She argues that, “Because these men work with animals, not machines or numbers, because they live outside in landscapes of torrential beauty, because they are confined to a place and a routine embellished with awesome variables, because calves die in the arms that pulled others into life, because they go to the mountains as if on a pilgrimage to find out what makes a herd of elk tick, their strength is also a softness, their toughness, a rare delicacy” (52-53).

16. While some equestrians find this framing as “new” problematic, due to previous horsemen's contribution to gentle methods — from Xenophon to Dorrance and Hunt — this analysis is focused on the significance of cultural productions, not the factual genealogy of horse training. For trainers of the past whose work claims to offer

something new, see also Willis J. Powell and J.S. Rarey's manuscript, *Tachyhippodamia; or, The New Secret of Taming Horses*.

17. The work of Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*, has been central to working through the gendered structures within Natural Horsemanship.

18. Further work might consider how Roberts often names and speaks of the horses he has lived and worked with in his book, while in the film about Brannaman the only horse which the audience comes to know for any length of time is the stud colt, Cal, who will supposedly be euthanized.

19. See Weedon.

20. See Chesebro.

21. See Atwood-Lawrence.

22. See Tracey Owens Patton and Sally M Schedlock's book *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism*.

23. See Reeser.

24. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Tompkins explains the labor of horses. She argues that, "Besides doing all the work in a literal sense, getting the characters from place to place, pulling wagons, plowing fields, and such, [horses] do double, triple, quadruple work in a symbolic sense" (90). They do a lot of work, but that work, Tompkins argues, is quite simple. The horse represents a connection to nature by their very presence, "Their dynamic material presence, their energy and corporeality call out to the bodies of the viewers, to our bodies" (93-94).

25. Steer wrestling is also called bulldogging. Atwood-Lawrence explains the event originated with a famous black cowboy, Bill Pickett. In 1881, on a Texas ranch, he observed bulldogs who took hold of cattle by their upper lips, biting down, subduing the animals until a cowboy could rope them. He decided to try this method himself, and he successfully adapted it and went on to perform as a bulldogger in the 101 Ranch Wild West Show. Cowboys no longer bite the steer's lips, but the contest retains its

roots, "that is, in pitting one man who must stay in superb physical shape in order to wrestle steers that may weight up to 700 pounds" (34).

26. See Birke and Brandt. Adelman and Knijnik provide world-wide statistics on the growth of women's participation in the horse industry (4).

27. I am grateful to Nigel Rothfels for his interest in discussing my early thoughts on Natural Horsemanship at the 2013 Animal Studies Graduate Student Conference at the University of Michigan, his subsequent invitation to be a part of an exciting and productive group of equine-oriented scholars at the 2013 Conference of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, and his ongoing encouragement. I am indebted to the Animal and Society Institute for my time at the Human-Animal Studies Fellowship at Wesleyan during June 2015, where I was able to complete this article; particular thanks goes to Kari Weil. Appreciation abounds for my committee, Frances Bartkowski, Jason Cortés, Mira-Lisa Katz, and my colleagues, Amy Lucker and Ned Weidner — all of whom have endured more than their fair share of horse-talk, and whose critique is essential to my process. Thanks also, again and again, to Christopher Myers.

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