



HEALING HORSES

THERAPEUTIC EMPLOT-
MENT AND MIMESIS
IN HUMAN-ANIMAL
RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

On the margins of modern medicine, horses are being used in psychotherapeutic work in North America. The interspecies healing encounters are predicated on a process of therapeutic emplotment which allows the human participants to narrativize their problems together with the horses. In turn, the horses are related to as valid social agents, who can 'look back' and respond to the humans in nonverbal, bodily attuned ways. This creates a 'back-and-forth' interspecies mimetic interaction: humans acting 'horse-like' to communicate to the horses, while, at the same time, interpreting the equines as 'human-like' co-therapists. This interspecies mimesis inspires a reflexive emplotment, that allows the participants to regain a sense of control and coherence in their personal narratives. I base my analyses in concrete fieldwork conducted over three months at an equine-assisted psychotherapy farm in Bellingham, WA, USA.

Keywords: multispecies ethnography; visual anthropology; human-animal relations; therapeutic emplotment; nonhuman agency; mimesis; self-reflexivity

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INTRODUCTION

The barn was only lit by frail moonlight, filtered through the cloudy sky. Enough to distinguish between moving shapes and the wooden structure. I was alone but not alone. Everyone was quietly eating, soft chewing noises and soft breathing noises. I saw their eyes and, just vaguely, distinguishing marks. I was not alone but I felt alone.

What had brought me to this farm in the American Northwest, searching for some kind of healing presence in the company of horses? My interest in an anthropology “beyond the human” (Kohn 2013) had started long before I encountered horses, but this was already my third equine experience in a relatively short span. My first stumble into this world had occurred on a rehabilitation center for wild horses in New Mexico, US, watching an animal behaviorist professional “gentle” and prepare these horses for human adoption. A couple years later, I conducted a two-week-long ethnographic field project at a hippotherapy center in Djursland, Denmark. The sensible consequence of these chance encounters was to follow them with a proper fieldwork in the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Equine-assisted psychotherapy¹ (EAP) is a branch of a recent field of therapy that incorporates nonhuman animals in various roles. It is significantly more popular in North America than in the rest of the world². I decided to conduct three months of fieldwork at the non-profit organization Animals as Natural Therapy in Bellingham, US. During these months, I became particularly fascinated by the relationships emerging between the horses and the human staff (or “horse people” as they describe themselves).

Animals are no strangers to the field of anthropology, though it is only recently that they have started to be recognized as subjects in their own right. This so-called animal turn has required a shift in both the methodology used to engage nonhumans, as well as an interdisciplinary expansion in the theoretical

¹ Henceforth, abbreviated as EAP.

² The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) website contains a map of all the registered equine-assisted centers around the world. Available online http://www.eagala.org/find_a_program. Accessed 20/3/2014.

framework (cf Taylor&Twine 2014). In this thesis, I try to follow suit by combining a self-reflexive methodology with the phenomenological potential of visual methods. Analytically, I position my research in the field of multispecies ethnography. As defined by Kirksey & Helmreich, this field studies “the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds” (2010:545) The focus is specifically on the intersection between healing emplotment (Mattingly 2001) and interspecies mimesis (Willerslev 2004). While my informants are not the official EAP recipients of healing, they acknowledge that “being with horses” creates a healing environment for the staff as well. In fact, I would argue that, the more experienced the horse people, the more healing the interspecies interactions. This leads me down several analytic paths: What is healing, in the context of Animals as Natural Therapy? How do my informants work with narratives and emplotment within and outside of the therapy sessions? What role do the equine participants perform, and how can they be regarded as subjects – not just objects – on the farm? Finally, how do the humans and the horses engage in mimetic encounters, and how is this interspecies mimesis used therapeutically? All of these questions intertwine to form the overarching research question: **How do interspecies encounters provide healing for human participants?**

In pursuit of these questions, I have produced a two-part thesis; namely, an ethnographic film of 28 minutes, which presents an overview of EAP work, introduces three of my main informants, and engages with the nonhuman dimension at Animals as Natural Therapy; and a written text, which accompanies and expands on themes introduced in the film, within a wider context of debates in multispecies ethnography. I conceive of the filmic and written parts of the thesis as complementary ways of providing an anthropological insight into the human-animal relations on the farm. Whereas the film focuses on creating an “ethno-dialogue” (cf Rouch&Fulchignoni 1989; Rouch 2003) between my informants and the nonhuman participants, the written text elaborates on narrativizing, agentive, and mimetic patterns observed and experienced in the field. The written part of the thesis has the following outline: a methodology chapter that elaborates further the context of my field, ethical concerns regarding

my informants (human and animal), the consequences of my various roles in the field, and my particular way of using video in a multispecies and multi-sensorial ethnography. The first chapter grounds the narrative framework of EAP at Animals as Natural Therapy, and explores the concept of “clinical emplotment” within the context of therapy sessions at the farm. The second chapter turns to the nonhuman participants and seeks to illustrate what kind of agency they express on the farm. To do so, I rely heavily on ethological and posthuman literature, and explore “looking at” and “response” as markers of nonhuman agency. In the final chapter, I enjoin the two paths of questioning, in the form of “mirroring”. Inspired by Willerslev’s examination of human-animal mimesis (2004), I explore how the horse people might “become Other”, for the purposes of reflecting back on their own personal narratives. It is through this distinctive reflection that the narratives reinforce their healing potential. Finally, I present the conclusions of the paper, with an eye on possible venues for future research.

METHODOLOGY: OF CAMERAS & HORSES

If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science? How might we catch some of the realities we are currently missing? Can we know them well? Should we know them? Is 'knowing' the metaphor we need? And if it isn't, then how might we relate to them?(Law 2004:2)

Perhaps the hardest step in the anthropologist's journey is to accept the unknowable. We arrive in the field as curious investigators confronted with a human puzzle and we go around, turning over rocks, asking the same questions, and sniffing for clues. Often times, our informants try to point us in more suitable directions, but, like children learning a new language, we require patience and practice as we fumble through unfamiliar tongues using familiar sounds. Such was my experience at the Animals as Natural Therapy farm. Right before my departure, my informants organized a therapy session for me, so that I might better understand their practice. I spent most of that time reiterating my doubts. Eventually, Lorna, the mental health counselor present, gave me a possible solution: “I think you spend a lot of time up-here [pointing to head] thinking about stuff and trying to figure it out. And today you just get to be and see and experience. And that might be really hard.”

LOOKING FOR CONSENT

In the following, I reflect on my methodological choices, with an emphasis on how visual methods might help the ethnographer juggle the phenomenological “being” in the field (that my informants, and John Law in the opening quote, describe) with the “up-here”-ness so innate to anthropology. I have previously examined general methodological concerns in my field report, but for the purposes of this thesis, I will briefly summarize some reflections on my roles in the field and my choice of informants, before returning to the visual focus.

I divided my days dutifully between my main human informants and spending time alone with the nonhuman cohabitants. On the one hand, my field notes are dominated by stories of the same characters that feature prominently in the accompanying film: the founder of Animals as Natural Therapy and my original gatekeeper, Sonja, the elderly “mare” (as I started calling her), motivated and inspired the daily survival of the non-profit organization through her affectionate nature and passion for horses. Tania, the only Native American staff member at the farm, had both a sociological and a documentary filmmaking background, so she naturally became one of my closest informants and friends in the field³. Because of my socioeconomic setting (living in a rural area without a driver's license), I would spend a lot of my “off research” time on car trips in the area with her, creating what Freilich describes as a “work-break game”: always itching for the camcorder whenever the conversation would inevitably lead back to horses and the therapy work (Freilich in Breglia 2009:130). On many of these occasions, Shannon would also join us. One of the most omnipresent human figures on the farm, she was a volunteer that helped primarily with barnyard chores but was also slowly beginning to work more as a mentor during the therapy sessions. She was always loud, rambunctious, and consistently lightened up the atmosphere around her. In addition to them, I also gathered interesting material with the barnyard manager, Susan, and with one of the mental health counselors, Lorna (both present in the video). My official purpose at Animals as Natural Therapy was “to document the horse therapy” for my university, so I was always encouraged to observe and participate in their therapy sessions. These were always run by an equine specialist (either Sonja or Susan) and a mental health counselor (either Lorna, or Joaquin, one of the very few male staff on the farm), together with the help of volunteering mentors (Tania and Shannon often had this role, and I occasionally tried it too)⁴. Due to its status as alternative therapy, EAP suffers from a pressing need for scientifically accepted qualitative and quantitative research (Davis et al 2014:302). In this sense, I was welcome to

³ This allowed us to develop a sort of collaborative filming relationship, wherein I would often ask for her feedback during filming or editing. At some points, I lent her my camera to film the horses “from her perspective”, and she also recorded the therapy session organized for me.

⁴ In this regard, Animals as Natural Therapy follows the usual pattern of EAP sessions (cf Tartakovsky; Mandrell 2006; Davis et al 2014).

the farm with the realization that my informants were equally invested in the “success” of my research project: “More people need to hear about this kind of work we do here!” (fieldnotes)

Early in the field, I realized that, due to practical restraints outside of my control, I would not be able to gather as much “deep” data on the young participants as initially planned. Still, given my official role as “media intern” within the organization, I was always present at therapy sessions, always documenting the therapy work and various other fundraising events. The resulting photo- and video-materials were used within the organization's own outreach efforts (in press or for further fundraising purposes). This was a role I filled happily, as it gave me an opportunity to spend most of my time recording in the field, while at the same relieving some innate anthropological guilt by “giving back” to my informants (Jackson 2004:40). On the other hand, as easily and excitedly as I tried to help my informants with my skills, I was constantly in doubt when interacting with the equines. The concept of gratitude with regards to the nonhuman participants was front and center in the therapy sessions: the youth and staff ended every session by thanking the horses for their time and patience. How was I thanking my non-human informants for allowing me to record and “interview” them? Was an extra carrot treat grateful enough?

Multispecies ethnography is “to an even larger extent than other ethnographies, faced with the problem of representation” (Maurstad et al 2013:324), a problem that increases whenever a camera enters the field. Other multispecies researchers encounter similar dilemmas: Maurstad et al remark that “no horses were interviewed in [their] study; it is their humans that speak on their behalf” (ibid). The question of voice and whether it is possible to “give” one to the animals, versus finding ethnographic ways of “listening” (Birke in Taylor&Twine 2014:71) was a constant concern throughout my time at the farm. I propose that nonhuman animals are vulnerable informants, because of the complicated layers of misrepresentation and power dynamics. According to the AAA Code of Ethics, “anthropological researchers working with animals must do everything in their power to ensure that the research does not harm the safety, psychological

well-being or survival of the animals or species with which they work”⁵. In the field-reality, however, the boundaries between psychologically “safe” and “unsafe” are often blurred by a number of social factors, such as the researcher’s “desire for knowledge” (Pedersen in Cederholm et al 2014:14), or the informant’s desire to help the researcher beyond their own sense of well-being. When vulnerable informants (such as underage, or nonverbal participants) are involved, the blurriness increases. Consent becomes an illusory concept. At what point in my three-month stay at Animals as Natural Therapy did I acquire the horses’ permission to film or photograph them, or to communicate about them?

My first filming in the field was of horses' feet, as seen behind the wooden fence posts. Fragments of beasts huffing and puffing. I was crouched low to the ground, unconsciously imitating the perspective of a smaller, camouflaged animal. That drew the horses’ attention. I noticed them peeking over the fence. “Horses are curious creatures,” my informants had told me. So I decided to “come clean” about my intentions. I stood up carefully and noticed Patriot, one of the oldest horses on the farm, staring at me intently⁶. I drew nearer him holding the microphone part of the camera out first. I did the same whenever I first approached a horse, offering the back of my hand, to be sniffed and considered by the horse. An invitation, to be accepted or refused by the horse alone. I thought of the microphone, an extension of the camcorder, as an invitation to film Patriot, and I interpreted his willingness to sniff the microphone and rub his lips against it as a curious concession. “I agree to this... for now,” was how I translated his curiosity in my head.

“ETHNO-LOOKING”

My camera (and the resulting photographs and video material) became my primary means of communicating with the nonhumans. The film accompanying the thesis is, therefore, my answer to the dilemma of nonhuman representation. Visual methods have been employed to greater extent in scientific research

⁵ American Anthropological Association. 2012. *Statement on Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibilities*. Available at: <http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics/upload/Statement-on-Ethics-Principles-of-ProfessionalResponsibility.pdf>. Accessed online 7/9/2015.

⁶ The cover image for the thesis is a photo of Patriot.

(Latour 1986:7), but in the past few decades, they have also become more recurring within anthropology. The double-heritage of film as both a medium of scientific knowledge and an art-form may have been deconstructed as positivist legacy (Ruby 1982:122-128), but it continues to influence, in some part, the perception of audiences. This was most obvious to me when I was asked to present a certain narrative about the healing potential of the horses through my photographic and video-documentation at *Animals as Natural Therapy*. My informants expected a certain aesthetic from the videos I created for them, one that embodied what Friedberg defines as “petishism”: “a movement that allows us both to perceive good qualities in animals as reflections of our ideal selves, and to project the best human attributes onto animals” (in Marks 2002:24). In terms of cinematic conventions, this entailed the use of certain background music (instead of the diegetic soundscape), stylized video transitions, and a narrative development that could underscore the positive qualities of interspecies relations. In my film, I had a similar aim of illustrating the healing atmosphere on the farm, though my methods were different.

The structure of the film follows loosely a back-and-forth dialogue between the humans and the nonhumans, as a reminder that this thesis project relies on interspecies “interrelating” (Birke in Taylor&Twine 2014:72). Following Haraway’s use of “relatings” (2008), Birke employs the term to cover “human-animal interconnections at many levels, a wide range of practices, including agriculture, and the place of animals within the production of scientific knowledge” (in Taylor&Twine 2014:74). From a desire to make animal agency more apparent in the research process (ibid:73), I have juxtaposed filmed interviews of my informants with observational footage of the nonhumans. In that endeavor, I was inspired by Grimshaw & Ravetz’s linking of observational filmmaking to phenomenological anthropology (2009). Observational filmmaking refers to a physical observation of subjects with the camera as an extension of the filmmaker’s body. This is done best with a handheld camera, which enables the filmmaker to move freely. There is no script and filmmakers have to trust their embodied knowledge. It is about the filmmaker’s relationship to his or her subjects and their shared lived experience (ibid:116-119). Their proposal considers

the “new” observational cinema as a “way of being, moving, and relating that hinged upon a particular training or education of attention” (ibid:139). Observational knowing becomes a mimetic practice (Taussig 1993) embedded in sensuous attending⁷. The camera, then, must encourage this way of relating. The camera must become interactive, or, as MacDougall describes it, it must “record its own interchanges with the subject” (2006:4). This was clearest in filmed conversations with Shannon and Tania, where I verbally recognize my position as an outsider to the field, when I ask them to clarify for me the horse's body language (15:00). However, I believe it to be of even more importance in my filmic “conversations” with the horses. While they cannot verbally answer back, they can reveal their awareness of my presence by looking back at me⁸, touching the camera with their faces, or sniffing my hands. Other horses, such as Patriot or Artemis (the last horse shown in the film (27:30)), would stop whatever they were doing and look back at me/my camera with an intensity one rarely encounters in humans. Above all other experiences in my field, these gazes “spoke” most clearly of agency and awareness (cf Smuts 2001).

This filmic interchange brings me to Jean Rouch's concept of “ethno-dialogue” (in Rouch&Fulchignoni 1989:289). In his cinematic work, he uses it to describe the ethnographic practice of allowing informants and ethnographer to mutually change each other in the field. As informants familiarize themselves with the strange ethnographer, they begin to respond to her “ethno-observing”, by “ethno-showing” themselves and “ethno-speaking”. He concludes that through “this permanent ‘ethno-dialogue’”, knowledge becomes “the result of an endless quest”, one that is more often described as “shared anthropology” (ibid). Whereas he uses the term to refer to the collaborative dimension of encountering his human informants (Rouch 2003:99), I believe it can also be applied in a multispecies context. As mentioned earlier, calling the horses informants is not without its ethical issues. Still, in ways that I will illustrate in this thesis, they can be considered sharers of some kind of social knowledge the humans use for therapeutic purposes. With that in mind, my intention in structuring the film like

⁷ As I will elaborate in the following chapters, embodied attention (Csordas 1993) is also an intrinsic part of nonverbal interspecies communication.

⁸ I will return to the concept of “looking back” in chapter 2.

an ongoing dialogue between my human informants and the horses was to recreate this “ethno-dialogue” of healing, while at the same time, portraying the quiet space I experienced in the company of these animals without other humans around. To this end, I have used audio recordings of horses breathing, the wind, or birds singing in trees (captured outside of filming) to represent the multisensorial experience of “being with horses”.

To go back to the premise at the start of the chapter, within the filmic component to this thesis I intend to illustrate how visual anthropology can be used to critique how nonhumans are narrativized and represented. I have gone over some ethical dilemmas in this section, but I allow the film to contrast the different ways of “being” or communicating with nonhumans.

CHAPTER 1: EMPLOTTING HORSES

Trying to convince people that horses offer therapy can be quite challenging. I don't feel like I've found a good way to help people understand it. I feel like telling the stories is one of the best things I can do. And if I tell a story of what happened with one kid and one horse, or one group and one group of horses, if I tell the stories, then people can either believe them, think about them, make sense out of them, or they think I'm crazy. (Sonja, interview)

In the healing space of the Animals as Natural Therapy farm, stories come in different shapes and sizes. They can be recognized by their linear structure (like in the many instances of storytelling or anecdotes, which follow coherent narrative structure for persuasive purposes (cf Frank 1991), that my informants engage in when they describe their work to people unfamiliar with the practice), or by their transformative content (containing within themselves “the emphasis on healing (or rehabilitation) as transformation, not only of the body but of the whole self” (Mattingly 2001:163)). These stories are a core part of my thesis, and so, in this chapter, I will aim to illustrate how the human participants on the farm encourage each other to narrativize their traumas and healing processes in order to gain a sense of coherence. To this end, I will use the backdrop of a particular session (organized by my informants, and featured in the last part of the film) to contextualize this therapeutic practice within Cheryl Mattingly's theory of (clinical) emplotment.

It was quickly getting dark outside, but the lights around the farm were diffusing a warm orange light on the faces of the two women. Sonja and Tania were both watching the two mares in the stable and were just starting the therapy session for Tania. Therapy sessions at Animals as Natural Therapy followed more or less the same pattern (pick a horse to work with from the 14-horse herd; bring them out of the stables; work with them in ways that I will detail shortly; and finish by returning the horse to their stable and drawing the conclusions of what was discussed during the session), though they often strayed into unexpected

territories. One of the mottos of the farm was "to allow Grace to happen", which Sonja explained as:

Lots of times we don't have any particular religion or anything that we profess here, but we all believe that there is a source of grace in the universe that guides us and guides the horses and helps kind of present the lessons. So we have lesson plans every week but we let the lesson be whatever it needs to be (interview).

This openness to therapeutic improvisation was even more present in the sessions held with adult participants.

On this evening, Sonja and Lorna, one of the mental counselors, had agreed to have a therapy session with Tania that I could observe and record more closely than I could the youth-sessions. The elder mare, Sucia, was standing close to them, on the other side of the banister. Her large head was over the fence, like a third therapist in the conversation, brushing her muzzle against Tania's hands. Tania was describing her relationship to the horse:

Tania: I didn't have very good relationships with my grandparents. That's why I value Sucia so much. That's why I value elders so much. Well, partly because of my culture also. But she was the first I met when I came here and I just touched her and it was magic. So I have a special place in my heart for Sucia.

[Sucia breathes on Tania's hand. Tania reaches out to scratch her behind her ear.]

Sonja: Like a wonderful grandmother touching you. Allowing that even though you never had that.

(...)

[As the women watch Sucia, the younger mare, Sienna, is standing at the opposite end of the stable.]

Sonja: Sucia has a lot of power in this relationship [with Sienna], do you see? Cause she's keeping Sienna away.

Tania: That's what I was talking about earlier: creating boundaries and keeping to them. I can't seem to say "no" to people who are older than I am. So I don't know, maybe that's what Sucia is trying to show me.

[Lorna, the mental health counselor, has been watching from the side]

Lorna: My sense is that we need to take both of them out together and see how that plays out.

[In the meantime, Sienna and Sucia swap positions in the stable, and now Sienna is closer to the women.]

Tania: Yesterday I was telling Sienna I'm not coming on Saturdays with the kids anymore and she literally just put her face in my hand. I was just holding her. This part right here [points to Sienna's chin], she was just letting me hold it. And she got me all wet!

Sonja: What do you think that was about?

Tania: I don't know. I think about that story I wrote for the newsletter. This part of her [chin] is so beautiful, I just love touching it. I don't know. She just... She wanted me to cradle her and hug her. That's what I was doing.

Sonja: Maybe she is saying, "Still come, be with me!"

Though this initial part of the session was very short, compared to the rest of the hour, it provided a strong introduction to the human participants, as well as setting the therapeutic background for the rest of the session. Tania introduced two concerns that had been troubling her and which continued to develop and unravel throughout the session: she has a problematic relationship with elders, and she is planning on cutting down her volunteering time at the farm (and maintaining those boundaries). These two appear distinct at the start of the session, but their recurrence throughout the evening reveal them to be more intertwined. Out of the three women, Sonja is unmistakably the elder on the farm, both in terms of seniority after founding the organization over 15 years ago, and in terms of social dynamics. When Tania remarks she finds it hard to say "no" to elders, she implicitly includes Sonja in that category, as someone who has trouble accepting Tania's decision to discontinue her volunteering, and instead invites her to "still come" and be with the horses.

This back-and-forth between observing the behavior of the horses, interpreting it, and using it to reflect on one's own life-narrative may appear odd to an outsider, but, as part of a longer tradition of using nonhuman animals in psychotherapeutic milieus, I argue that it corresponds, in part, to Mattingly's application of narrative theory in clinical environments. Next, I will describe the setting of equine-assisted psychotherapy practices, before returning to narratives.

HEALING WITH HORSES

For a relatively new form of alternative therapy, EAP has managed to garner a lot of popular attention based almost entirely on anecdotal and qualitative research. Though up to some debate, the practice that draws its roots from experiential psychotherapy (Klontz et al 2007), animal-assisted therapies (Davis et al 2014), and the culture of natural horsemanship (Birke 2007), is classified as a complementary or alternative therapy. What this means is that, in terms of its form and objectives, EAP functions outside the biomedical field, as an alternative system to achieving psychological and social well-being (Davis et al 2014:302). Experiential psychotherapy is a school of psychotherapy that focuses on “subjective experience and [promotes] reflexivity and a sense of agency” (Greenberg et al 1998:3). More concretely, as explained by my licensed mental health professional informants, experiential psychotherapy confronts the client with activities and situations that encourage safe opportunities “to be curious [and] reflexive” (fieldnotes). In the case of the therapy sessions in my field experience, this is most clearly illustrated by how the staff never claim to have any answers. Instead, inspired by the participants’ interactions with their horses, they ask questions that relate what is happening in lived time to the client’s wider-arching narrative or life story (Linde 1993).

Similarly to experiential psychotherapy, animal-assisted therapies have a short history⁹: they hail from mid-20th century, when a child psychotherapist noticed the positive social effects of introducing a dog to the session (Chitic et al 2012). Since then, AATs have developed across species, to greater or lesser scientific recognition. In essence, these therapies promote the use of animals (ranging from

⁹ Although, without being called “therapies”, humans have been relishing the therapeutic effects of non-human animals for centuries (van Dierendonck&Goodwin 2005)

cats and dogs, to horses or dolphins) as therapeutic aides in order to foster a healing site of nurturing and sensory stimulation (Mallon 1994:471). In my interactions with EAP practitioners on the farm, as well from the few studies on the topic, it becomes clear that horses are considered superior “co-therapists” to other animals for various reasons. Most informants emphasize the sheer difference in scale between humans and horses. In one of my interviews with Shannon, she articulates this difference in terms of control: “I like horses because of the power! I can get on him and control him. I’ve never been in control of anything. Having a horse gave me the strength and made me feel big and powerful, when I’ve never felt like that with people!” (interview)¹⁰. Despite that, with some surprise, I realized how little actual riding takes place at Animals as Natural Therapy. Though there is some riding planned during some sessions, it is never the main focus of the session. Instead, it is treated like a bonus on top of the usual groundwork participants do with horses. This brings me to another facet of the argument for horses: their different sociality. When asked about the therapeutic preference for equines, Sonja replied:

Horses give us more immediate feedback on how we are in the world. Horses teach us more immediately, because they are prey animals [unlike humans or dogs, which are predators]. They can teach us awareness, and how our actions affect other people. so many of us go through life blustering along. They know a lot about emotions, forgiveness. (interview)

On this innately biosocial difference I will elaborate more in the following chapter. The second half of the quote, however, is part of a wider cultural narrative about the emotional intelligence of horses, which can be traced back to the body of beliefs known as “natural horsemanship”.

The culture of ‘natural horsemanship’ refers to a recent paradigmatic shift in human-horse relationships (Birke 2007). In trying to move away from centuries of dominance-based aggressive training of equines, proponents of natural horsemanship argue for interspecies similarities which represent the foundation of a more respectful partnership. Horses are no longer just instruments to be bent to

¹⁰ I will return to the role of control in interspecies encounters in the third chapter.

humans' will; they are acknowledged as sentient beings whose physical, psychological and social well-being are fundamental to any successful endeavor. As a system of beliefs, natural horsemanship descends from “cowboys”, trained in the traditional methods of horse handling, who felt such violent methods were not successful enough at fostering happy riding partnerships. As one such proponent puts it: “We need to understand prey consciousness because that’s how horses think and we want to be successful with them. But understanding prey consciousness will teach us other things – things like empathy and patience” (Irwin 1998:37). The emphasis on “natural” is in establishing a human-horse connection based on how a horse might better understand it. I will elaborate on the ethological ground for these beliefs in the second chapter, and on the mimetic implications of one of their most enduring tenets in the last chapter.

At its essence, then, this equine-assisted form of experiential psychotherapy is “designed around setting up horse-related activities that require clients to apply particular skills such as nonverbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking and problem solving, [and] leadership” (Frewin&Gardiner 2005:10). These horse-related activities can include mutually respectful equine activities such as handling, grooming: “exercises can be as simple as putting a halter on a horse, or entering a round pen containing more than one untethered horse” (ibid:11). While different in its emphasis from specifically physical forms of hippotherapy, equine-assisted psychotherapy still incorporates a physical element of bodily interaction between participants and horses, but the goal is to establish a respectful relationship, not to horseback ride. EAPs are being used for a variety of mental and physical disorders, but in my field-experience at Animals as Natural Therapy, I have only observed what Frewin&Gardiner refer to as mental health and human development needs: “behavioural issues, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, abuse issues, depression, anxiety, relationship problems and communication needs” (ibid). Because of the specific training required by the staff, the farm was not equipped to work with physical disabilities, nor with disorders on the less functioning side of the social spectrum, such as autism.

While my ethnographic research can, therefore, only speak of this one small community, in my many conversations about and literary forays into the world of equine-assisted psychotherapy and natural horsemanship, I noticed similar patterns of organizing this equine healing space. The practical arrangements might vary from farm to farm, but these patterns linger, primarily in the cast of characters: horses (they can be ‘born and raised’ on a therapeutic ranch, or they might be new additions after careers in other fields, such as racehorses, or privately owned horses abandoned for whatever reason); mental therapists (in the case of the farm, two members of staff were experienced counselors who had previously worked in more traditional psychotherapeutic venues and who found the addition of horses to enrich the healing process); horse specialists (certified through an international organization¹¹; 6 such members of staff); participants or clients (these ranged in age from young kids attending sessions primarily to learn how to handle a horse, to teenagers in chemical dependency or bully prevention programs attending sessions primarily to learn how to handle themselves in troubling situations, and finally to adult war veterans looking to learn how to cope with their post-traumatic stress disorders). In addition to these essential groups, Animals as Natural Therapy also used a great deal of volunteer energy: either as mentors assisting the young participants individually during the psychotherapeutic sessions, or as helpers in the office or in the barnyard with general maintenance duties.

Simplified for the sake of the argument, the EAP formula (as observed on this farm) consisted of three interconnected steps: firstly, the humans learn to “read” the horse (a practice I analyze further in chapter two, in connection to its ethological foundations); secondly, the participants have to interact with the horse in an equine-legible way (through an interspecies process of mimesis that will be the focus of chapter three); and finally, as a current underlying the previous steps, the humans encourage reflexive narratives (which I cover in the following section, following Mattingly's theory of 'therapeutic emplotment').

¹¹ In North America, the most renowned organizations were Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) and Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), which is where most of my informants were certified.

"WHAT - SO WHAT - NOW WHAT"

The title of this section refers to the particular therapeutic structure employed at the farm. In simple terms, all sessions had in common a circular structure: beginning with the “emotional and physical check-in” of the human participants, continuing with the equine activities, and ending again with a re-evaluation of the session. This final step was called “what – so what – now what” based on the three questions the therapists asked the participants¹²: What happened to you during the session?, So what did you do in response to that?, and finally, Now what will you do in your life, inspired by this session?

I include such an example in the video project (05:40), where one of the girls describes her work with Sir. The obvious goal is to help the participant reflect on their own issues or needs, by using the horse as a metaphor. Another motto at the farm emphasizes precisely this metaphor-making aspect of this practice. Sonja describes it during their regular farm tours to new volunteers:

So when a kid comes in and he's working with a horse and the horse reaches over and nips at him, we'll teach the kid how to create the boundary, and then we'll say, 'Who else nips at you?' or 'Who do you nip at?'. And that's creating a metaphor. Gives them something to think about. Sometimes they won't answer, sometimes they will. We're not really looking for the answer so much as we're looking for the thought process. That this is what it feels like to be bullied, to our kids who are bullies. Or that this is how you stand up to a bully, to our kids who need these tools. So this is sort of what we do here! (field notes)

This process of finding metaphors in their interspecies encounters brings me to narratologists like Cheryl Mattingly and Paul Ricoeur, and the concept of 'emplotment'. Narrative studies within anthropology have a long-standing tradition, either by analyzing distinct units in discourse; or by examining the performative aspect of life histories, through a cognitive framework; or by connecting their aesthetic force with healing powers (Mattingly 2001:14).

¹² While the pattern remained the same, asking this question after every session was used primarily in youth groups, to help them better connect their horse-work with their lives.

Different traditions define narrative differently, but for the sake of brevity, I will be using the term to mean most generally interpretations of actions, events and behavior in a dramatic framework that serve to illustrate a motive or causation. Mattingly refers to narratives as, firstly, a matter of “action: In stories people do things and as a result situations change, or things happen to people and as a result the people change” (ibid:242). More importantly, though, narrative is no longer restricted to the realm of artistic expression: the narrative turn, as outlined by Mattingly, is attempting to “connect narrative expression, lived experience [and] practices of self and community-making experiences” (Mattingly&Jensen 2009:6). The role of community is relevant especially in a psychotherapeutic context because, as Ricoeur underlines, “the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader” (Ricoeur in Wood 1991:26). If text can be taken to also mean the short, anecdotal narratives created by participants as part of their sessions, the influence and support of the reader (in this case, the other staff and participants listening to and offering feedback on the story) undoubtedly heightens its significance.

While stemming from Aristotelian writings on literary genres (where it referred to both fables as imaginary stories, and plot as well constructed stories (ibid:21)), emplotment has developed an independent theoretical life. One aspect of it is as a synthesis between “events or incidents which are multiple and the story which is unified and complete [...] the plot transforms the many incidents into *one* story” (ibid). Therefore, emplotment is “effort at story-making”, in the sense of creating one *coherent* story from several smaller story-units¹³. Mattingly observes this practice in clinical interactions between occupational therapists and patients in American hospitals, but extends it to mean more than story-telling. “Sometimes they create story-like structures through their interactions” (Mattingly 2001:2), and it is this effort that creates a therapeutic dimension for emplotment. It is easy to draw connecting lines between Mattingly's observations of therapy in clinical settings and the therapeutic work my informants do among horses and youth,

¹³ To the role of “coherence” in healing narratives I will return shortly.

despite the differences in setting¹⁴. Both are concerned with “configuring therapeutic activities which point to particular readings” of experiences: these can range from reading one's illness in such a way as to incentivize the patient to continue the often arduous process of recovery (Mattingly&Jensen 2009:257), to the less 'life and death' situations of learning to establish and respect healthy personal boundaries (as Tania's case of being caught between pleasing the elders in her life, and needing more time for herself). This brings up an interesting question: if the work that Animals as Natural Therapy conducts is not as “life and death” as Mattingly's experience in clinical therapy, how can one talk about “healing”?

My informants use “healing” and “therapy” interchangeably in their daily discourse to mean a range of ambiguous transitions. I asked all of my staff informants similar questions (“How do you see healing?” or “What is therapy for you?”), but here I highlight Lorna's answer: “a shifting awareness of oneself” (interview). Translated more concretely, this shifting of awareness takes place when the participants get external input (either from the staff or horses) which helps them reframe their personal narratives. Narratologists highlight the significance of narrative in psychotherapy all the way back to the Greeks wherein “epic, drama, philosophy and the 'noble rhetoric' sought to produce in the soul *sophrosyne*: a beautiful harmonic and rightful ordering of all the ingredients of psychic life, by strengthening will, reorganizing beliefs, or by eliciting new beliefs more noble than the old” (Frank 1991:66). Ricoeur also connects narrative fiction to “an irreducible dimension of self-understanding” (Ricoeur in Wood 1991:30). This invisible harmony of 'psychic life' is encouraged through one's interrelating with others, a “dynamic process in which meaning is not a given but something actors struggle to discover” (Mattingly 2001:9). I understand this dynamic process to be connected to a level of self-reflexivity nurtured also by the interspecies encounters, as I will elaborate in the following chapters, but within this chapter I analyze primarily the human efforts at story-making.

¹⁴ Informants emphasize the atmospheric benefits of doing therapy outside, with animals, as opposed to being stuck indoors.

Going back to the therapy session started earlier in this chapter, the therapeutic dimension seems to thrive from the women's efforts at emplotting. What sets such healing work apart from that described by Mattingly in her research is the fact that the action is less human-centered. An essential step in the emplotment is that the horse as Other must be "read" or deciphered ("What do you think that was about?"). At Animals as Natural Therapy, the staff always try to re-include the horse in the unfolding narrative. Mattingly's therapists:

[...] select out of innumerable clinical events only some which they deem relevant for an unfolding story. These, they try to build on or counter. And they describe these events to themselves in a way which shows them to belong to that story. They see a patient's smile as encouraging or as subversive, for instance. In that simple labeling, they are both relying on and elaborating a narrative context, naming the smile as part of a larger, unfolding therapeutic plot. (Mattingly 2001:155)

The same is true on the farm, except the horses are actively made part of this emplotment, and the labeling is co-shared with the participants. In fact, the latter have as much – if not more – control over the unfolding plot, compared to the therapists. In this specific case, it is up to Tania to offer a "reading" of the horse-action, and, ideally, up to her to connect this reading to an aspect of her personal issues¹⁵, in the search for personal coherence.

Charlotte Linde discusses coherence as a textual quality of life stories, whereby she examines how people narrativize events in their lives through a coherent framework (1993). Thus she argues: "the process of creating coherence [...] is in fact a social obligation that must be fulfilled in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture" (ibid:16). Indeed, not just within the culture of the horse people, the coherent "construction and presentation of self [is] a personal demand [as well] as an interpersonal demand and achievement" (ibid:50; cf Ruby 1982). I link this to a level of reflexivity that I will elaborate in the final chapter. Still, the role of coherence is not expressly pivotal within the therapy sessions at the farm. As Lorna, the mental health counselor put

¹⁵ The latter is more successful with adult participants than with the young ones, who often require the assistance of the "What – So What – Now What" pattern in order to negotiate their own narratives.

it: "It's naming what you see happening and asking questions! So I'm just saying what I'm seeing... it's almost too simple. That's what makes it hard, for people who don't do it all the time." She goes on to use a previous case as example:

During the session, the horse wasn't relaxing. The food became a distraction, so the question was: 'Do you get distracted by other people's agendas?'. And it was a 50-50% chance it happened to [the participant], and it was true... If it doesn't work, you just move on to the next thing. ... You planted a seed, which might come up the next week. (interview)

This indicates that "while there may be some sense here that the therapist is in charge, there is also a sense of teamwork, of patient and therapist being part of the 'same story' which is still unfolding, one neither have tremendous control over" (Mattingly&Jensen 2009:257). Concerning the employment of horses, there is no higher textual authority in the healing stables. The therapeutic intention is always to reveal a sense of coherence between the horse's behavior and the participant's life narrative. The human therapists may thus translate the horse's behavior in terms of metaphors, but it is the participant who is in in charge of accepting these possible metaphors, or allowing the "seed" to come up. If there is no visible connection between one particular equine action and the participant's life story, the therapists will move on with their explorations.

For an outside observer like myself, this level of interspecies employment raises ethical concerns about representation (cf Methodology section). What made my informants so confident in their labeling of horse-stories? And how could the horses be considered active participants in the therapy sessions? In the following chapter, the horses become protagonists, and I examine how their social agency might be considered on the farm through a more self-reflexive gaze.

CHAPTER 2: FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

There is without doubt someone returning my gaze when I look into the eyes of animals involved in our research. Yet, although our ethnographic work tries to include encounters with actual animals, I do not necessarily feel that I am meeting horses as the co-producers of these social interactions, except through human narratives relating to them. (Birke in Taylor&Twine 2014:74)

In my last week in the field, my closest informants (Sonja, Susan, and Lorna) decided to organize a therapy session for me. In their opinion, I had spent 3 months observing and filming and interviewing my informants about their own therapy sessions, but the research lacked my participation in the process. How could I understand what it is like to be healed with a horse if I had never personally done it? I agreed, somewhat nervously, and asked Tania, the only person on the farm comfortable with a camera, to film the session for me. My subsequent reviewing of the filmed material (from a perspective I had no recollection of) forms the ethnographic basis for most of this chapter, as it helped me gain a different awareness of the horse's specific kind of agency. In this endeavor, I am inspired by ethnographers using visual methods in their ethnographic analyses (cf Mattingly 2001; Birke in Taylor&Twine 2014). Birke, in particular, in the opening quote to this chapter, captures similar multispecies ethnographic concerns in her own work with equines: the search for the returning gaze. The aim of this chapter is to analyze this “returning gaze”, in the context of nonhuman agency. More so than in other sections of the thesis, I am relying on reflexive ethnography (cf Okely&Callaway 1992) and my own encounters with the horses. In this, I am inspired by anthropologists who contrast a self-conscious reflexivity against how necessary self-awareness is to the ways in which “we glean knowledge from others and how we subsequently represent it” (Skultans 2007:113). I propose that horses are not just passive objects used in psychotherapy; through observation and looking, their agency is felt like a presence. The way to learn about horses is through the intentional act of looking

at these animals and patiently waiting for them to respond. I will also highlight the relevance of interdisciplinary methodologies for engaging nonhuman subjects.

THE SOCIAL HERD

One recurring argument that I heard from my informants in answer to “why horses in psychotherapy?” was that, as prey animals, they had developed a very different type of social behavior, which made them more “intuitively” “aware” of other beings around them (fieldnotes). That horses were highly social creatures engaged in fascinating intra-species dynamics (cf Argent 2013; Feh) was a fact I hadn't doubted since I first spent time with wild mustangs a few years back. It was a fact that I was always aware of when observing the therapy horse herd on Sonja's farm, and it was also on my mind on that cold December afternoon when I was watching Sonja, Susan and Lorna “ask” the herd which horses would like to join my session. At the time, I was feeling too anxious to notice the herd's reactions, but I remember feeling surprised at the chosen (or volunteering) horses: Sucia, the calm grandmother of the herd, Moonshadow, her daughter and a steadfast black horse, and Sienna, the horse introduced in chapter one. Like many volunteers, I had horses I felt closer to than others, and these were not them. Nonetheless, I started to wonder what these choices in equine co-therapists reflected about me...

Like many nonhuman animals with a long domestication history, the horse's role and position in relation to humans has evolved gradually across millennia (cf Mullin 1999; Harvey 2006). I will not go in depth into its transition from sustenance and labourer, to hunting aid and companion animal, but I will merely underline its richly layered presence as part of human history. Like many places inspired by the culture of natural horsemanship, *Animals as Natural Therapy* struggles to go against a long history of exploitation and abuse. The training of the horse specialists I encountered at the farm (as well as the ones I read about while I was there, to further familiarize myself to the practice (Kohanov 2007)) is centered on a narrative that argues for the agency of the horse and its physical and emotional well-being. These horse specialists meet the equines in a social space that constantly recreates the conditions for this well-being. This is not a

space for whips and spurs, or violence and dominance; this is a place for respect and bodily attention (Csordas:1993).

Observing horses in their “naturalistic” environments¹⁶ represents one of the fundamental methods to understanding how this species interacts with its physical and social environment (Feh). As prey mammals, horses are claimed to have developed increased multi-sensorial awareness, including almost 360° eye-sight, and almost antenna-like hearing, to better notice and escape predators from great distances (Wathan&McComb 2014). Horses also use their olfactory senses to a large degree, and their noses are essential to interspecies greetings. Recent studies show them capable of interpreting “human emotions” (Smith et al 2016). All this is not so much a testimony to the uniqueness of the equine species; nonhuman animals, generally, are much more sensorially evolved than the human species, in terms of their bodily awareness of their environment. Yet this bodily awareness is one of the building blocks in the foundational narratives employed by EAP practitioners.. Moreover, it is an indication of the level of interspecies knowledge required within the field. Ethologists recognize other sources of information that can be used to generate useful research, such as: “natural history, individuals' perceptions, intuitions, feelings, careful descriptions of behavior, identifying with the animal, optimization models, and previous studies” (Burghardt in Bekoff 2002:49). Additionally, my informants have educated themselves through a mix of observation (of equine behavior on other ranches), participation (prior riding interactions with horses, implying a decent understanding of the technicalities of riding and of the bodily alarm signals one must pay attention to whenever in the presence of a much larger animal), and learning from other established leaders in the natural horsemanship community.

This is reflected not just in their interactions with the horses, but also in the way they structure their lives (how they are housed, how they are socialized, how their time is organized). As a particularly gregarious mammal, horses have a very well-developed sense of herd dynamics and social hierarchies (Birke 2007). What this means is that, in domestic contexts, horses are always partnered with other

¹⁶ Not to be confused with feral horses in wild environments

horses, but their relationships differ from member to member. When aggressive behavior is observed between two animals, measures will be taken to separate them. At the farm, this concern is displayed in many intimate ways, including physically, in the way they separate the horses, as well as narratively (as shown in the first chapter, in Sonja's description of the tense relationship between Sucia and Sienna). It is this physical attention that I turn to now, in briefly introducing the equine natureculture on the farm.

The equine herd consists of 14 horses, out of which 3 are recent additions to the farm, still in training for therapy work. The equine specialists pride themselves in being very attuned to and concerned with the social well-being of the horses, which means that, together with a freelance energy healing practitioner that is regularly called to the farm to check up on the horses' health, they have moved the horses around the available space, several times, until finding a format that leaves all the horses happy. One such example is the partnering in one stable of the two mares introduced in chapter 1, Sucia and Sienna. Whereas in Tania's session, they were observed to have a very tense relationship, with the younger mare dominated by the older one, in other sessions (including my own), the two mares did not interact as much or as conflictually. Similarly, in my observations of the herd outside of therapy sessions, I noticed that Sucia and Sienna appear capable of sharing that space without altercations. This is an example of the kind of logic underpinning the narrative process explained in the previous chapter: if the two horses do not have a hostile relationship normally, the most obvious reason why they would in a specific situation has to do with the human participants present in the session.

“LICKING AND CHEWING”

Tania: I told [Patriot] my story and he started chewing.

Me: Why was he chewing?

Tania: 'Cause when the horses chew, that means that they agree with whatever it is that you're saying. It means that you're congruent. (interview)

“Congruence”, as used by my informants, can be understood as “coherence” (within one's own narrative (Linde 1993)) or a state of self-awareness that promotes the kind of healing reflexivity mentioned in the previous chapter. This bodily awareness is a skill acquired through learning about the horses' physical cues. As part of the therapy work, inexperienced participants (such as myself) are taught how to recognize when a horse is growing restless, fearful, or aggressive. Much of equine therapy relies on strengthening one's awareness of one's body as well as of other (human or nonhuman) bodies around them, similar to what Csordas describes as somatic attention (1993). For him, everything from dancing and making love, to athleticism and hypochondria are “neither arbitrary nor biologically determined, but are culturally constituted” (ibid:140) means of engaging with one's social and physical environment. I found his theory relevant for my research based on observing how my informants carried themselves around the horses, always watching and constantly in some kind of physical contact with the nonhuman bodies. Nonhuman ethnographers like Argent look at specifically synchronous activities with humans and horses (such as riding or competitive showing) to emphasize the role of nonverbal communication between two social species: “It is through nonverbal channels that humans engage in corporeal-kinetic sense-makings, forging a sense of themselves and of the world, and, in a social sense, forging an intercorporeal world, a world of common understandings” (Argent 2013:114).

Thus, for the purposes of healthy and accident-free interaction, humans were encouraged to constantly pay attention to equine body messages. Swishing of tail, or flattening of ears backwards meant the horse was irritated or even aggressive, and the human participant was warned to adjust whatever they were doing until the horse relaxed again. The horse beginning to turn their rear end towards another participant was always a big signal of alarm, as it tended to forecast the intention of the horse to kick the participant with its hind legs. On the other hand, mellow eyes (or as Sonja called them, “a softness to the eyes”) and a calmly lowered head indicated relaxation and comfort. “Licking and chewing” (the horse would lick its lips or chew as if it had food in its mouth) was always a positive indication that the horse was “agreeing” with whatever was being said or done in

its presence. Some bodily actions could be interpreted in different ways, depending on context: a horse pawing at the ground with their front hoof could mean either irritation or anxiety, or it could indicate the horse was merely preparing for a "roll", which was always done in situations deemed comfortable or safe by the horse.

Nonetheless, there is a great ontological jump from understanding when a situation is stressful for a horse, to a horse agreeing with the congruity of a participant's sentiments. "Licking and chewing" refers precisely to the latter – a nonhuman willingness to hear what another is saying or feeling, and to agree with it. I found that to be one of the most striking elements of the interspecies encounters at the farm. As I will also illustrate below, in one of the therapy sessions where I performed as the participant, "licking and chewing" was often interpreted as "Look, even the horse agrees! Stop trying to justify or overthink it!". This specific semantic unit from the horse's mouth was one of the clearest indications – to my informants – that the horses knew what they were "talking" about, a loud and clear example of nonhuman agency.

Early on in my session, I started to voice my concerns. My discomfort mainly stemmed from "having so many people trying to decipher or to help me." Sonja responded in her usual comforting manner:

Sonja: It's not helping you; it's so much as we point out things and are curious, we want you to notice things and see, help you see if that means anything to you. So it's not like we're here to help you, it's not like we think you need help, OK? It's that we're here because we like you, we care about you–

Me: Well yes, and that makes me a bit uncomfortable.

Sonja: Having that many people care about you?

Me: Yes.

Sonja: And three horses, who all want to tell you that!

Susan: Who all wanted to be part of this.

Sonja: So maybe that's part of the question today. Or the answer.

As I was expressing my doubts, Sucia, the old grand-mare, starts approaching us and then stops in line with Susan and Lorna. She stands calmly present while I look far in the distance, at a hill shifting colors from autumn to winter. She then comes up to me and I offer her my hands and she sniffs them for a couple of minutes. Lorna mentions a message appearing in her mind: "Open your heart up". At that point, Sucia moves slightly away from me and tries to reach for the clipboard and pencil left by Susan on the fence. Susan and I both notice and start laughing, which is misinterpreted by Sonja:

Sonja: She's licking and chewing, is there something you need to write down possibly?

Me: Possibly. I always need to write things down.

Susan: There's a notepad, you're welcome to use it.

Me: I think she just wanted to like-- well, I don't understand how her reaching for the pencil is about me, and not just her reaching for the pencil.

Sonja: This whole thing is about you. We've asked them, Lorna asked them who wanted to help, who wanted to be part of Armina's session, and so everything they do here is intentional.

Before that point, the mares were off-camera, to one side of the pen, while the four of us (plus Tania filming close-by) were just in front of the gate, ostensibly looking towards them. The moment I start expressing myself, however, I noticed Sucia entering the frame from the right, with the same lazy calmness she always exudes. She came to a halt right between Susan and Lorna, with her large, low head framed by their shoulders. They noticed her, but didn't comment, as they were trying to convince me that everyone was intentionally present in the session. This was a moment that completely evaded me during my experience there, but which completely resonated with me when reviewing the footage. Suddenly, I could see intention in Sucia's action, linked intrinsically to the topic of our (human) conversation. Whether she understood it linguistically is not the issue. Instead, through her bodily attention, she illustrated what it is like for a nonhuman agent to really see you and respond to you.

“LOOKING BACK”

Nonhuman agency is a tricky issue within social science, primarily due its emergence in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (1999). Put simply, it refers to a subject's ability to act and form relations within a wider network of subjects. Agency is thus allowed to escape its human bounds and find a home in nonhuman objects and artifacts also, but especially in the kind of interrelational forces that activate subjects and objects into social networks. With regards to the encounters at the farm, these forces can best be understood with the help of Donna Haraway's theory of “looking back” with animals. In her work on posthuman naturecultures, she uses as inspiration Jacques Derrida's encounter with his cat, and his subsequent findings on the difference between “response” and “reaction” in terms of agency. This encounter refers to Derrida walking into his bathroom naked, to find his cat staring at him. As a way to explain his instinctive feeling of shame at his naked state in front of his cat, he wondered whether the cat could see his nakedness and respond to it (like a human would). He asked himself, “How can an animal look you in the face?” (Derrida&Wills 2002:377). For him, “response” relates to “responsibility”, that seemingly human-centered ability: “responsibility is never calculable. [...] to respond is not merely to react with a fixed calculus proper to machines, logic and – most Western philosophy has insisted – animals” (Haraway 2008:77).

Contrary to his conclusions, Haraway insists on a different reading of “response” that exceeds the human sphere. This might appear ungrounded in the study of humankind, but it is a necessary step in the unshackling of the human from “Human”, and in its rejoining to “Animal”. For Haraway, the shame in Derrida's encounter was entirely a result of a human inability to seriously engage with the cat, or to “risk knowing something more about cat and how to look back, perhaps even scientifically, biologically, and therefore also philosophically and

intimately" (ibid:20)¹⁷. She places the difference between "response" and "reaction" in "respect", which she traces etymologically to "*respecere*" or "looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face oneself" (ibid:88). Conversely, she identifies in Derrida's interspecies experiment with his cat a lack of "respect". "*Respecere*", then, is the link between an aware response and the notion of "having face" – "to respond is to respect" (ibid:23), and to have face is to have recognizable social agency(ibid:24). This is illustrated in primatologist Smuts' encounters with Kenyan baboons, where she describes the process of "becoming Other" or developing the kind of "face" that the baboons could interact with (Smuts 2001). In her case, and, I would argue, in the case of my informants, this process is achieved first by learning the "language" of the nonhuman Other (equine body language), and then by utilizing this language to engage them in social encounters.

With regards to my own therapy session, I read my missed opportunity to recognize Sucia, as she approached me and looked at me, as similar to Derrida's (mis)understanding of his cat-situation. I did not see her as a subject attending to me, because I was too caught up in self-conscious musings. This kind of loss of interspecies awareness can occur when one forgets to attend bodily. As Csordas describes it, "to attend to a bodily sensation is not to attend to the body as an isolated object, but to attend to the body's situation in the world" (1993:138). I have shown that horses are believed to be able to innately attend to their own bodies in relation to their world. I would also posit that my informants, these women working daily with horses, speaking with them, looking at them, and inviting them to help other humans to speak with them and to look at them, these women are closer to capturing the horse-like attention and to embodying Haraway's ideal curiosity. Through their bodily vocabulary, the staff betray a similar somatic attention that the participants are encouraged to exercise throughout the sessions, as they physically and patiently attend to the horses' recognition.

¹⁷ Examples of how interspecies engagements stemming from 'responding' and 'looking back' can advance scientific and biological research abound (cf Bekoff 2002, 2007; Smuts 2001)

CHAPTER 3: “HORSES MIRROR HUMANS”

At the heart of the natureculture surrounding the practices of natural horsemanship and equine-assisted therapies lies an often-repeated motif: “horses mirror humans”. This creed underpins the philosophical architecture framing the pursuit of meaningful communication and relating between humans and horses. As it is used by the horse people, the motto refers to a belief that horses have the ability to “read” the emotional state of their human handlers and reflect it back (Wipper 2000:60). The degree to which this actually happens is disputed even within practitioner communities, but, on a most basic level, horses are believed to “read” and “mirror back” human body language through their own behavior. In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of how humans can “read” horses and recognize their specific form of agency, within and outside of therapy sessions. Below, I continue the exploration of therapeutic human-equine practices through mimetic lenses. Based on my data, as well as Rane Willerslev's work with the perspectivist mimesis of the Yukaghir (2004), I unravel the reflexive potential of these interspecies encounters. My argument is that, through the intentional process of “mirroring” (as it is called within natural horsemanship) or “becoming other” (Haraway 2008:244), the human participants learn to reflect in new ways on their personal narratives. The chapter begins with an analysis of the central role of “mirroring” or interspecies mimesis in the practice of the farm. It follows with the connection between this “mirroring” and the “hall of mirrors” described by Ruby (1982:19) as a process of self-reflexivity.

The “mirror” metaphor is not a new one in the field of human-animal relations, anthropologists using animals to “think” (Levi-Strauss 1962) for as long as there have been anthropologists to think about humans. By focusing entirely on the agency of the human to the expense of that of the nonhuman (Mullin 1999:211), this “mirror” carries, thus, the passive charge of objectification. Haraway phrases it as “polishing an animal mirror to look for ourselves” (Haraway 1991:21). But this is not how I encountered it in my fieldwork, and not how I will be using it throughout the rest of the thesis. On the contrary, I prefer Jay Ruby's use of the “hall of mirrors” (1982) to ascribe a sense of refraction to the interspecies

encounters. It appears to mimic human sociality, but its reflection is more cracked than perfect, becoming a reflexive mirror instead. I will return to these cracks in the mirror following an analysis of “mirroring” at Animals as Natural Therapy.

THROUGH THE “HALL OF MIRRORS”

One of my informants, mental health counselor Lorna describes this motif prevalent in the culture of horse people:

The horses made more sense because ... they would mirror whatever emotional state you were in. I've sat in counseling classes where people avoid talking about their issues. You can talk around that for hours, but the horses made it so that you can't talk around things. So it comes up in the present time if that person has issues of anxiety, or is not able to set boundaries, or not good at communication, the horses will play that out with them and they show that they're not communicating clearly, and are not setting healthy boundaries. (interview)

As I illustrated in the previous chapters, and as it is shown in the video scenes of therapy sessions, this mirroring potential is used therapeutically by the human staff. Their main task – besides making sure everyone is physically safe around the horses – involves observing the horses' behavior in relation to their clients, who are often not experienced horse handlers. As observers, the volunteers, horse instructors, and counselors “read” the horse's body language, and ask the human client questions relating to the horse's behavior; questions that, through their very nature, create a link between equine behavior and human behavior.

Sonja gives an example of this, when describing how to “read” a horse:

You read a horse by watching their ears. Their ears prick forward when they're curious, they might turn sideways when they're listening, or they might lay back when they're mad. Uhm. Their eyes. One time, I was walking with a veteran, teaching him how to lead a horse, and his horse looked a little bit grumpy. And I said, Notice her eye. She's a little grumpy in the eye, and her mouth is a little bit tight. And I said, I think if you give

her another inch or two on her lead rope, she's gonna be more relaxed. And so he moved his hand on the lead rope, gave her another two inches, and I pointed out to him, I said, See her eye? It's softer now, her mouth is less tight. And he grinned at me and said, That's how I lost my last girlfriend, was too much control! So that was a beautiful lesson, and this horse was happier, walking beside him now with less control. And he was gonna take that back to his relationships. (interview)

Besides illustrating Sonja's characteristic way of narrativizing the potential of interspecies therapy, this anecdote also serves as an example of "mirroring". In it, the veteran is suddenly made aware of his problem with "too much control" by "reading" the horse's body language. Sonja, as equine specialist and thus versed in attending somatically to the horses, acts as an interpreter between species, but she does not herself comment on the participant's personal life. Instead, she merely draws attention to the horse's body language and suggests a simple remedy for the situation at hand. In doing so, she reminds the veteran of the presence of another being with its own requirements and needs. In the situation described, it is up to the human participant to draw his conclusions and notice whether this mundane event reflects in any way on his life. Humans are "self-interpreting animals" (Taylor in Mattingly&Jensen 2009:18), so, in identifying a reflective surface in the horse's behavior, the veteran can better reflect on his own issues. Whenever I asked my informants about the equine ability to "mirror" humans, I was always given examples such as this one, of horses behaving in a certain way that would push either the therapist or the participant to reflect on their own concerns.

Besides anecdotal evidence, I also observed a similar process during Tania's session, portrayed in the accompanying film and introduced in the first chapter. The potential for "mirroring" stands out in the three women's commentary of the horses' behavior, while out in the round pen. The mares were described as having a hostile relationship, and in some respects, that tension permeates into the human sphere as well. The younger mare Sienna was standing by the group and Tania was stroking her neck, when, suddenly, Sienna lowered her ears as the

older mare Sucia approached. Within equine body language, lowering of ears is generally understood as a sign of aggression. Thus the two horses quietly swapped positions in the round pen. The women experienced this exchange as a conflictual one; they all laugh, a bit surprised, and Lorna asks aloud, “What was *that* about?” As the participant in the session, Tania offers an interpretation: “I think Sucia was basically saying ‘I’m the boss here, I’m the dominant one’.” Sonja directs the follow-up to Tania’s personal history, as mentioned at the start of the session (in chapter 1): “Is that your experience with elders?” Tania doesn’t take long to answer: “Whatever they tell me to do, I’ll do it. Or I’ll feel like I’m in the way and not doing anything of value.” As they continue to observe the behavior of the two mares, Sonja responds: “That may not be the issue. Maybe [Sucia] just wanted that to be acted out, so you could talk about it.”

The issue of generational tension resurfaces only a couple minutes later, when Sucia is preparing to roll in the sand. Sienna is standing as far away as possible in the pen from the older mare, restless and constantly watching. Sonja evaluates the situation as one where Sucia is expressing her dominance in relation to Sienna: “Sucia is going to roll wherever she darn well pleases, whenever she darn well pleases. But Sienna is having a hard time with that.” After more tense shifting from the young mare, Tania expresses anxiety. “She’s just making me feel like I can relate to her.”

This particular concern of Tania’s does not find a resolution within the session, though by the end of it, she expresses some relief, in the form of inhaling and exhaling: “[Sienna]’s taking some deep breaths. Which I wasn’t doing, I was still holding my breath.” Again, Tania has received similar training as that used by other EAP practitioners on the farm, so she is familiar with the back-and-forth emplotting described earlier. She relies on Sienna, in particular, for guidance in this reflexive process of the therapy.

On a surface level, this mirroring or reflexive process may appear purely narratively driven, the horses themselves being no more than therapeutic paraphernalia used to trigger useful reactions and introspective reflections that can carry the emplotment to its healing destination; instruments and objects

imbued with imagined agency to serve the higher, human, healing narrative. Indeed, this reminds of one of Mattingly's case studies involving the "overreading" of a patient's responses "to promote a particular version of the patient's potential self" (Mattingly 2001:110-114). As used by Mattingly, "overreading" refers to the narrative process of labeling a patient's behavior in ways that differ greatly from those of the therapist: As she writes:

Intentions may be difficult to infer and narrative contexts are often uncertain. And of course, the multiple actors engaged in therapy bring different interpretive perspectives: these too, create ambiguities and even struggles over how a patient's behavior should be labeled. (ibid:110)

It is worth taking a look at the case example presented by Mattingly, where a therapist and a mother engage in an argumentative interpretation of the potential evolution of an 18-month-old toddler with developmental damages due to cocaine exposure. The therapist is using different physical activities with the infant patient, for which she provides a positive narrative commentary using cheerful dialogue and going "far beyond a simple report about pathology or progress" (ibid:111). The purpose of this is to convince the patient's mother that he will not be negatively impacted in his later development by his diagnosis. In this particular example, the therapeutic employment functions in fascinating layers: the therapist is not only doing her official work with the toddler. Through it, she is narratively encouraging the mother – outside of the official therapy session and feeling unconvinced about the infant's chances – to take part in the session and to support him beyond it as well. But Mattingly, as an outside observer, indicates that the infant-patient has almost no agency in this narrative "tug of war" between the parent and therapist. Instead, it is just a body *reacting* (not *responding*) to external physical stimuli; therefore, in her analysis, his agency in the narrative created by the adults is discarded.

The case of the nonverbal toddler patient sends me back to the nonverbal and nonhuman animals in the therapeutic work. An observer unfamiliar with the scientifically grounded practices of my informants might interpret the therapy sessions as a group of women "overreading" equine behavior. If a horse cannot

interject verbally, does that mean it cannot communicate in a nonverbal way either? In the previous chapter, I have argued for a different reading of nonhuman agency, one that, inspired by the work of multispecies scholars, acknowledges intention and meaning through the decisively nonverbal acts of “looking back” and “response”. I cannot speak for the patient infant observed by Mattingly, but I can try to provide a more complex painting of the horses’ roles in the therapeutic performance.

BECOMING HORSE-LIKE

Outside the session, Tania had developed a close relationship to Sienna, the kind that leads to what other multispecies scholars describe as “co-being” (Maurstad et al 2013). In research on human-equine relations, “co-being” is used to refer to three dimensions of interspecies engagement and entanglement: a synchronous dimension of “intercorporeal moments of mutuality”; an agentic dimension of “meeting the horse as subject and individual”; and a “becoming” dimension of “co-shaping and co-domesticating each other” (ibid:324). While the first dimension focuses primarily on riding encounters, where human and horse can develop an almost transcendent level of corporeal synchrony in their physical activities (Argent 2013), this was not the predominant kind of interrelating I encountered in the field with my informants. This is in part due to the lack of emphasis that staff at Animals as Natural Therapy place on riding as a psychotherapeutic activity. Riding does occur throughout the sessions, and all my informants are passionate riders, but in the physical frame of the farm, very little riding took place during my stay. The focus, as the staff put it, was on “developing healthy relationships with the horses through groundwork”, such as grooming, leading, or doing joint-up (fieldnotes).

Regarding the agentic dimension, I have previously illustrated the extent to which the horses at the farm are celebrated as individual subjects with agency of their own. They have both species-peculiarities, instincts that make them particularly useful co-therapists, as well as individual personalities that can help a careful observer distinguish between two similar looking horses based on their behavior, posture, or the company they keep. Finally, there is the third,

“becoming” dimension that I want to explore further, as a bridge back to the mimetic encounters described earlier. In my fieldwork, this level of interspecies attunement required to learn how to listen to the horse and to communicate back extends beyond the borders of the body and the synchronous dimension of “intercorporeal moments of mutuality”. Instead, the key components in my human informants' mimetic relations are observing, looking at, listening to, and sensing around horses.

One of the clearest examples of “successful” interspecies communication I observed was when Sonja had to respond to the aggressive struggles for dominance of one of the most recently-arrived horses on the farm. Artemis came to the farm with another mare, Abby, and the two were always inseparable. They were both the largest horses on the farm, but while Abby was submissive and gentle, Artemis was not only the dominant one of the two, but also the most aggressive horse on the farm. During my time, she attacked two different people and the staff were losing their patience in trying to teach her to relax and become less aggressive, with talk of giving her away to another farm.

Whenever Artemis was separated from Abby, she would whinny loudly and kick at the ground. Whenever staff tried to approach her during feeding time, she would immediately pull her ears back, in obvious sign of aggression. Once staff realized the connection between some of her violence and feeding, they decided to separate the large mare-pen into temporary individual stalls during feeding, just so every horse would get her separate hay bag. They also discouraged everyone from approaching Artemis during these times. This helped alleviate Artemis' tension.

On one particular occasion, Sonja had to embody “alpha-mare”, in an effort to subdue the aggressions of Artemis. As experienced equine specialist, she was able to attend to the slightest physical changes in the mare. When Artemis flattened her ears backwards and was trying to turn her rear towards Sonja, she interpreted this as an aggressive move that posed the threat of physical attack. Sonja's immediate reaction was to raise her voice in a scolding manner and to expand her own bodily presence. By using a cue stick and a lead rope in her

hands, Sonja was thus able to significantly increase her pressure-space against the mare. Both tools added a couple extra meters of distance between herself and Artemis, while at the same time exerting pressure on the mare by limiting the space she could use. Later, Sonja explained that the way to assert oneself as a leader in relation to a horse like Artemis is by forcing the horse to physically move around the available space, or by “driving” her, as opposed to allowing the horse to intimidate the physically smaller human into retreating. Someone had to perform the role of the “herder” and that was whomever was in control at that particular moment (human or equine). Sonja’s control over the physical space (by restricting the pen area) and control over the other’s body (using the cue stick and spinning the lead rope to “drive” the horse in different directions) eventually tired the mare out so that Artemis would stop running around and allow Sonja to approach without attacking.

While this scenario differed in affective charge from the synchronous riding studied by Argent(2013), it was a mesmerizing example of Willerslev’s mimesis. In his work with the Yukaghir hunters (2004), he describes the mimetic paradox of impersonating an animal Other, for the purpose of seducing and hunting it, while at the same time maintaining the human perspective as well. As he writes: “What we are dealing with is a strange fusion or synthesis of me and not-me into not-not-me” (ibid:642). This synthesis takes the form of a hunter-prey dance, wherein the survival of the human depends on his skill of keeping up a “double perspective or [acting] as a double agent”: he must “be aware not only of the prey animal, but also of himself being aware of prey, to make sure that his perspective is neither that of a hunter nor that of the animal, but somewhere in-between or both at once” (ibid:639).

The therapy farm is far from the hunting grounds of northern Siberia, but watching Sonja mimic a giant horse made of human flesh, rope and cue stick, in order to “dominate” Artemis is clearly reminiscent of the Yukaghir hunter-prey dance. In the case of equine-assisted psychotherapy, human participants are encouraged to mimic the horse by learning to understand and respond to their specific nonverbal lexicon. Young participants in the sessions are taught to take

on the right posture, always keep their eyes ahead, or maintain their spatial boundaries when leading a horse. In a social sense, the human is thus acting the role and position of another horse-like creature. The reverse is also true. In their daily interactions with the animals on the farm, all humans treated them as if they were human-like subjects. In the accompanying film, Shannon is seen interacting with the horses in a joking manner, playing tricks with Sir, or asking the mares if they're having a grumpy day (13:00). Since co-being with horses does not have the same fatal consequences of the Yukaghir allowing themselves to be seduced by the elk-perspective (and thus endangering their human soul), the distinction on the farm between “not-horse” and “not-not-horse” becomes even vaguer.

Still, in an interview with Susan, the barn manager, I asked her if she felt that the horses had similar emotional lives to humans. I was surprised by her answer:

I don't see them as human-like. I see them as quite different. I'm not sure we can interpret their emotions the way we would human emotions because they're different. They're herd animals that are prey. They come from a completely different place than humans do in the animal world. So I don't really feel that their emotions are the same as humans', but I think they understand human emotions at least to the extent that we can understand horse emotions and that we have emotions in common.
(interview)

This perspective contradicted my observations in the field. In the ways they are interacted with, talked to, and narrated, the horses seemed to inhabit a social space normally reserved for humans. The question was then: what were the borders of this vague space of becoming “horse-like” and where did the healing reflexivity begin?

This could be linked to “anthropomorphism”, that deadliest of sins in natural sciences (cf Bekoff 2002; Candea 2010). In fact, anthropomorphism is being reclaimed by ethologists as a valid, empathetic epistemological tool. As Bekoff argues, in his study of emotions in animals:

By engaging in anthropomorphism we make other animals' worlds accessible to ourselves and to other human beings. By being anthropomorphic we can more readily understand and explain the emotions or feelings of other animals. But this is not to say that other animals are happy or sad in the same ways in which humans (or even other members of the same species) are happy or sad. [...] Using anthropomorphic language does not force us to discount the animals' point of view. Anthropomorphism allows other animals' behavior and emotions to be accessible to us. (Bekoff 2002:48)

One can easily see the connection between anthropomorphizing and identifying nonhuman others as human-like. The horses on the farm each had individual stories, distinct personalities, and different lessons to teach the humans willing to listen. During one of my first encounters with the horses on the farm, I was paired up with a mare, Sundance, doing beginner activities like leading, or joint-up. Less than half an hour later, Sonja was laughing at my situation and telling me that Sundance is “the boundary horse” that teaches participants about how to be assertive. Due to at least my inexperience with horses, I was having trouble getting Sundance to either listen to me, or not to take up too much of my space. I was personally finding it hard to say “No” to the horse from a misguided sense of politeness. “It wouldn’t be nice to push her away”, was what I thought to myself as I allowed her to set the pace and the direction of our activities. Going back to the example of Sonja calming down Artemis, in her words, I was allowing Sundance to “herd” me, thus inadvertently proving my own submission. Not only was I not a good horse-like human, I was also engaging with her more like with a human than with a horse. I use my experience as an example of a failed mimetic encounter that could still lead to some healing reflexivity (in my case, with the help of Sonja, learning to pay more attention to how I assert my needs).

However, in the cases of more experienced horse people, these lessons could be even more gratifying. Such is the example of Shannon who, earlier in the thesis, emphasizes how important the sense of control is when she is with the horses. I

have previously mentioned “control” as a healing consequence of the emplotting and mimetic interrelatings at *Animals as Natural Therapy*, and I now return to it as quasi-conclusion to this analysis of the layered interspecies encounters. In his analysis of the role of mimesis in contact between cultures, Michael Taussig links mimetic practices to a desire to control the Other (1993:77). His example extends to interspecies mimicry also:

[...] chickens being clucked into order by what their masters regard as somehow seductive chicken-sounds at mealtime; horses being cajoled by their masters with what their masters take to be horsey and horse-encouraging sounds. In short, these are the sounds that Englishmen use not merely to imitate animals but to control them [...]. (ibid)

At least on a surface level, this will remind the reader of similar practices by my informants (imitating equine behavior in order to better subdue the horses), but I would argue their encounters lack the abusiveness and arrogance of Taussig’s subjects. The relationships emerging between my informants and the horses are predicated on a desire for mutual help and respect. In the instances where Sonja or Shannon “dominate” a horse, their horse-like behavior is inspired by observation and empathy, similarly to Willerslev’s informants. And when the horses respond to their actions, they too contribute to the maintenance of this interspecies mirroring. What I mean is that when the horses “answer back”, they act out in my informants’ narratives and thus encourage reflexivity. They do so by collaborating with the staff in creating what Ruby refers to a “hall of mirrors”, or “the effect of the anthropologist looking at the native looking at the anthropologist” (1982:19). In my field, I apply this metaphor to the encounters between my informants and the horses. The latter are agents engaged in a looking-dialogue which serves to encourage the humans to reflect critically on their own issues and narratives. As he elaborates, “merely holding up a single mirror is not adequate to achieve this attitude. The mirrors must be doubled, creating the endless regress of possibilities, opening out into infinity, dissolving the clear boundaries of a ‘real world’” (ibid:3). In this back-and-forth mimetic process, human and horse reflect each other, “[pulling] one toward the Other and

away from isolated attentiveness toward oneself" (ibid:5). While I cannot claim to make such arguments about the reflexivity of the horses individually, I propose that the deliberate employment tendency of my informants follows Ruby's definition of reflexivity:

Being reflexive means the producer deliberately, intentionally reveals to an audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused the formulation of a set of questions in a particular way, the seeking of answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally the presentation of the findings in a particular way. (ibid:6)

In a similar vein to anthropologists, my informants spend most of their lives participant observing with, listening to, and narrativizing about an Other, all the while engaging reflexively with the knowledge thus obtained.

CONCLUSIONS

We live in a more-than-human world (cf Abram 1996)

A multispecies ethnography that embraces the “myriad of relatings” in interspecies encounters (Haraway2008) is still a relatively recent anthropological endeavor. Nonetheless, within the current “Western” culturescape of an increasing desire to connect to the nonhuman Other (Marks 2002:26), there is a pressing need for more political engagements with the naturecultures we co-inhabit. Even though, in my field, I do not feel I have encountered interspecies oppression to the kind academics involved in animal rights activism might have (cf Taylor&Twine 2014; Pedersen in Cederholm et al 2014), I am still “inevitably embroiled in ideologies and histories of research that deny animal subjecthood” (Birke in Taylor&Twine 2014:77). A quest for a critical more-than-human ethnography can entail, among other things, an awareness of the long objectifying history of nonhuman animals, or, as mentioned in the methodological chapter, a desire to problematize the representation of vulnerable informants.

Throughout my thesis and accompanying film, I seek out less anthropocentric perspectives. In film form, this takes the shape of narrative interruptions that make space for the nonhuman agents to communicate back. I do not claim to give the horses a voice, because I believe they already have one. Instead, I try to reflect on my human informants' narratives with breaks from nonhumans “looking back”. Like many other visual ethnographers before me, I consider the multisensorial potential of this medium to be more adequate for representing vulnerable subjects (Marks 2000), as well as for depicting what my informant Lorna called “just being and seeing and experiencing” (fieldnotes).

As for the written part, I develop the argument that emplotment in interspecies mimetic encounters can provide a healing refuge for humans. In doing so, I am guided by other multispecies ethnographers that argue for a multidisciplinary engagement with our naturecultures. Scientific research in animal behavior is a key component to how my informants engage with the horses. Its relevance to arguing whether animals are considered agents or objects is indisputable. Guided by my informants' emplotment strategies, I too aim for a merging of reflexive

narratives and ethological observations, in order to more accurately represent the “metaphors and images for what is impossible or barely possible, unthinkable or almost unthinkable” (Law 2004:6) within the healing natureculture of “being with horses”.

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