Beyond the Horse-Crazy Girl

LEARNING TO LIVE ACROSS SPECIES

By Natalie C. Hansen
**Black Beauty, National Velvet, My Friend Flicka,** Ann Romney’s Olympic dressage horse Rafalca, infamous race horses such as Barbaro and Seabiscuit, and, of course, My Little Pony. What does a three-ounce plastic figurine vaguely recognizable as a “pony” have in common with 1,200 pounds of flesh-and-blood horse? What stories help us narrate our relationships to these very different types of beings? What is the draw toward such figurative and material instantiations of animality? What explains the fact that there are over 9 million horses in the United States 150 years after the industrial revolution mechanized transportation and labor, rendering our dependence on horsepower a relic of our past? The sensual and emotional glories of mud, sweat, tears, and triumph are all very real aspects of contemporary horse-human partnerships, but there is something more that inhabits this horse-crazy love.

Understanding the “something more” has been a lifelong obsession of mine and became the subject of my doctoral dissertation and subsequent research. This research is deeply influenced by feminist, queer, and anti-racist scholarly and activist reexaminations of how boundaries of gender, sexuality, and race are deployed in hierarchies of power and disempowerment. The application of theoretical insights and material implications of animal studies opens the question of how species difference defines aspects of human dominion and ideological and institutional privilege. My focus on domestic horses and on human-horse partnerships emphasizes species specificity and highlights both the vital role horses have played in human history and the liminal position of horses who exist legally as livestock but affectively as pets. This messiness of boundaries and transformation of roles is quintessentially queer, and my analyses of human-horse relationships explore ways we can productively disrupt boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.

Chapters of my doctoral dissertation exploring literary representations of human-horse relations have been published in the anthologies *Beyond Human* and *Speaking for Animals.* I continue this work, preparing a book manuscript, *Horse Stories,* that expands my doctoral research on literary equines and their human companions. The book offers three specific foci. First, it explores the phenomenon of “talking” horses in literature and popular culture. The textual history of this narrative strategy includes Balaam’s donkey, which channels the voice of God in the book of Numbers, and the Houyhnhnms, the superior beings who close Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels.* Twentieth-century media phenomena such as Mr. Ed, the
How do horses mediate homosocial relationships in texts such as The Red Pony and My Friend Flicka? In my readings of literary and popular narratives, I critique conventional scripts of human-horse relationships that derive from androcentric and anthropocentric humanism and argue that narratives of cross-species relationships can offer imaginative and concrete ways to rethink the messy accretion of human and nonhuman.

eponymous talking horse who inhabited the popular 1960s television series, highlight the question of what talking horses have to say to humans and why horses in particular are chosen to communicate their messages. Second, the book explores how horses begin to appear in significant affective partnerships with girls and women in the nineteenth century, and how they gallop together through the twentieth century in a multitude of literary and popular forms, including National Velvet—exemplary among the many books partnering girls and horses in boundary-disrupting adventures. What do these stories offer girl readers beyond adult scripts of penis envy and autoeroticism? How do stories about girls and horses open up transgender and trans-species identifications?

Third, the book examines the cowboy, a construction of masculinity that relies on equine partnership for its very definition and often also relies on colonizing relationships to land, other people, and animals. In what ways do the historical figure of the cowboy and the mythology that surrounds this figure coincide and diverge? What is the affective work of cowboy-ing that eludes representation? How do horses mediate homosocial relationships in texts such as The Red Pony and My Friend Flicka? In my readings of literary and popular narratives, I critique conventional scripts of human-horse relationships that derive from androcentric and anthropocentric humanism and argue that narratives of cross-species relationships can offer imaginative and concrete ways to rethink the messy accretion of human and nonhuman.

A second project that focuses more specifically on how material relations with horses are organized in contemporary society asks specifically what sociocultural changes have fostered the contemporary shift toward affective relationships between humans and horses. Do shifts in human-nonhuman relationships reflect broader renegotiations of species interdependence? This project began a few years ago with research and the publication of an article on representations of working relationships between male prison inmates and feral mustang horses, examining the terms of mutual capture, domestication, and rehabilitation that have been used to describe these relationships. Along the way, I wondered whether similar programs exist for female prison inmates, a
smaller percentage of the incarcerated population and often allotted fewer resources than male prison inmates. This question was answered during a chance meeting with one of the directors of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF), a nonprofit organization that provides homes for retired or discarded racehorses and matches the horses with prison inmates who help retrain the horses for adoption while gaining job skills and a certificate in equine care technology. Currently, the TRF sponsors ten programs for male inmates and one program for female inmates. This latter program offers fifteen female inmates from the Lowell Correctional Institute in Ocala, Florida, the opportunity to work with the horses in the same structured training program that is offered to male inmates.

The CSW Tillie Olsen Grant will allow me to conduct preliminary fieldwork with the women and horses at the Ocala location. In addition to reading accounts of the women’s work with the horses, I will explore through interviews and observations what is unique about this training program, over and above the potential job skills the women gain, and will compare it with existing inmate dog-training programs. Considerations include the structure of the program itself, which involves a combination of book learning and hands-on training, and the relationships the women build with individual horses, with other participants, and with training staff. Beyond training in animal care, inmate-animal programs are understood to result in positive social and affective outcomes that reduce recidivism rates. Engaging in training programs offers participants the opportunity to transform the negative self-identity that results from incarceration and other social and economic challenges and to develop a “new prosocial sense of self” through positive interactions. How does this shift happen during the training for these women? Does it work for all the women? How do programs with horses differ from programs for inmates who train service dogs? What unique aspects do these particular former racehorses contribute? What is the outcome of the training for both the women and the horses? Some of the women appear to identify with the horses, which often arrive in
poor condition, feeling defensive and scared. The training program challenges both human and equine participants to work through fear and mistrust, fostering mutual growth and community solidarity.

This research will be included in a book project that focuses on horses in therapeutic contexts, including inmate education and rehabilitation, trauma recovery (from domestic violence or PTSD), psychotherapy, and spiritual growth and discovery. What therapeutic effects do horses have for humans recovering from physical and emotional traumas? What might these experiences contribute to contemporary understandings of healing relationships between human and nonhuman species? Having begun my research exploring stories about the special attraction to and close relationships between girls, women, and horses, this project will ask how horses can help humans heal from trauma, endure conditions of social and institutional oppression, and grow as individuals. This work also asks how humans can facilitate better material and emotional lives for horses, foregrounding the responsibilities we have to better understand the specific qualities of our nonhuman partners and respect their particular equine subjectivities and agencies. Broader ecofeminist and ecocritical implications of this project include its participation in drawing attention to local, national, and global interspecies interdependencies. What might we learn from the opening up of identity and belonging that cross-species relationships allow? Ultimately, my inquiry asks how learning to recognize the importance of communicating across species differences can help further progressive social and political reforms both within our own human communities and with the multitude of species that constitute the global community.

NOTES
Fear and Loving in Los Angeles Public Schools

WHAT VOLUNTEERISM REVEALS ABOUT WOMEN AND WORK CULTURE

BY ZARA BENNETT
MY GROWING CRITICAL engagement with my role as a mother of soon-to-be-school-age children informed my decision to apply for affiliation as a Research Scholar at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women. In the years leading up to my elder daughter’s enrollment in kindergarten, I had participated in, read, and overheard countless exchanges among local mothers trying to navigate the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD.) The largest school district in California and the second largest in the nation, the LAUSD represents a massive system covering 710 square miles and more than 850 schools serving over 664,000 students from K to 12. Understandably, having your child enter a system of this scale and magnitude can produce a certain degree of parental anxiety.

However, the standard rhetoric surrounding public school choice betrayed the presence of something deeper than just feelings of parental malaise. Whether at the park or the workplace, the neighborhood-school bashing and the fear mongering I witnessed among my fellow parents suggested that many felt the system was broken or at least in a sad state of disrepair. Parents’ negative perceptions of local public schools seemed both to feed into and to create this conflicted relationship with the LAUSD. Being myself a successful product of public institutions from elementary to graduate school, I wondered what had given rise to this shared sense of deception vis-à-vis traditional Los Angeles public schools.

Having heard tales of highly successful neighborhood schools and others that were up-and-coming, I started to think about what it would take to repair the District as a whole—could parents put it back together? When I began reviewing literature and conducting informal surveys, it quickly became apparent that mothers were at the forefront of this movement not only to express discontentment, but also to mobilize it as a means to effect change in public education. Writer, performer, and LAUSD mother Sandra Tsing Loh’s fictionalized memoir, Mother on Fire, offers a cogent example of public school anxiety redirected to empower others to engage with the system and, most importantly, to leave your neighborhood school better than you found it.

In my Research Scholar application, I proposed to study specific models of maternal engagement in LAUSD, particularly the creation and maintenance of edible schoolyards on its elementary school campuses. Thinking about
the broader significance of this trend, I wanted to explore how this grassroots involvement in schools could be seen as something larger, like a nascent movement. Could maternal engagement in urban school gardens signal a larger cultural project in which women were rethinking their relationships with public institutions, their communities, and their peers? I headed to the closest school garden in my neighborhood to find out.

**ENTER WALGROVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

I first made my way to Walgrove Avenue Elementary School for a prospective parent tour last spring. During the visit I saw a mother preparing mixed greens grown in the edible garden for a class salad bar activity; kinders were enthusiastically crowded around an outdoor picnic table helping to make a vinaigrette-style dressing for the mixed greens they had just harvested. As Ruth H., the mother leading the activity, likes to say, “Zara was hooked on Walgrove from the first moment she saw me doing salad bar.” I left the tour thinking that Walgrove was potentially a good fit for my daughter: it had a climbing API score, a core group of invested parents, and a one-of-a-kind studio program for developing a creative engagement with core subjects. What’s more, it had a thriving green garden maintained by dedicated parent volunteers.

After the tour I did some sleuthing to get the contact information for one of the Walgrove mothers who was responsible for the edible garden. Connecting with the gardening group seemed like the perfect way to begin pursuing my research agenda and, at the same time, to collect more information about the school I was considering. After attending a few of their meetings and chatting with these Walgrove parents, I had pretty much decided that this was the right choice. In anticipation of my daughter’s matriculation in the fall, I began attending the garden meetings more regularly. There I learned about an exciting greening initiative the school community was preparing to undertake: building a schoolyard habitat. (See http://walgrovewildlands.com.)

Six bungalows that had previously housed a charter school that was colocating in the Walgrove campus were going to be dismantled. As a result, there was an opportunity to take up the asphalt that had been covering the ground beneath them. The working plan was to green 25,000 sq. ft. of the campus by removing the asphalt and creating a schoolyard habitat on the exposed area. It was an ambitious project with only limited funds available to make it happen. Since I had expressed interest and had a background in writing, I was asked by a key member of the group to write some grants in support of the greening initiative. When I agreed to do some grant writing, the switch got flipped: I crossed over from passive observer to active participant in the project.

The first directive that I received from Emiko K. on becoming a member of the greening team reframed my research agenda as well. “There’s no room for negativity in this project,” Emiko reminded me whenever we encountered a particularly rough patch of road...
as we tried to move forward. She was right—looking around at the mothers who juggled work schedules to attend garden meetings and community workdays said as much. And so I crossed out the first item on my research agenda, as locating the source of the negative affect that got redirected into community led-initiatives seemed a fruitless line of inquiry. What mattered was mothers voluntarily taking on work to transform schoolyards, not their refocused negativity.

LOVING, NOT FEARING, PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN LOS ANGELES

Focusing on the “work” forced me to redesign my project and to think about the circulation of affect in a different way. Namely, instead of examining how negative affect disconnected parents from public schools, I would study how positive affect connected mothers to schoolyard transformation and, by extension, to a larger community of women. As an active participant, I experienced firsthand the way in which this kind of intense volunteering made one part of a system of personal relationships defined by a shared commitment to public education. I began to build affective ties linking me emotionally to my close female collaborators. Together Emiko, Clare C., and I formed the Walgrove Wildland’s steering committee, a tightly-knit trio that functioned as an unstoppable greening team.

While I appreciated this kind of intimacy with my Walgrove colleagues, I was completely unaccustomed to it. My prior experience working in academe had left me disillusioned, doubting that working mothers could be allies, advocates, or mentors for each other. What, I wondered, was responsible for this shift in behavior (or attitude) that enabled mutually supportive relationships among working mothers to flourish here? My intuition led me to explore the role the working environment played in giving rise to this positive phenomenon. What was it about this specific context that strengthened these relationships between highly engaged mothers? It seemed to me that their success was a function of the particular way affect—what we feel or the sensation our feelings describe—circulated in the volunteer work economy.

In a volunteer work force, affect must be managed thoughtfully and intentionally—it cannot be discounted as it is in the traditional work place. In a volunteer work force, where people are not being monetarily compensated for their efforts, the tenor of the affective economy determines the efficacy of the project and its production. Take, for example, the Whole Foods Venice Joyful Activists Club, a community-based group of volunteers whose motto is “Transforming outrage into outrageous fun.” They set out to infuse fun into volunteerism while pursuing “serious change,” and they succeed at doing both. As Emiko stated earlier, negativity—the transmission of negative sentiment—could not be tolerated because it would undercut the motivation of the volunteer work force: to feel appreciated, valorized, and integral to the project. By creating the conditions to reinforce mutual respect and understanding, this positive affective economy had effectively shaped the dynamics of relationships among the green team members at Walgrove.

In the guise of field notes, I have written and published a series of introspective essays on my blog, Going Public, that feature work and motherhood as reoccurring themes. (See http://goingpublic.tumblr.com/archive/ ) A central focus of my writing has been trying to make sense of the incompatibility of emotion with the dictates of traditional work culture. I often attempt to reconcile being a highly sensitive person with the tacit imperative in the office to disregard sentiment, or at least downplay the affective side of the individual worker. My constant refrain in these essays has been that affect matters in the workplace—particularly to me as a working mother.

I have positioned myself as an advocate for
people who care deeply, who feel acutely, and who reject the dehumanizing market logic dominating traditional places of work. My writing project is to force a space for emotion into public discourse about work, be it in academe or elsewhere. Feelings betray our humanity and, as such, need to be recognized and reckoned with instead of being declared inconvenient or inappropriate in professional contexts. If I can begin to pry open this closed discussion, I might make room for talking about the connection between who we are and how we feel. Women, particularly working mothers, need to be able to take ownership of the affective dimension of their personal and professional identity without being stigmatized in the workplace.

Thinking back on my voluntary departure from a tenure-track position, I can begin to appreciate the way in which my inability to manage the negative affect that dominated the working environment soured me on academe. I could not get beyond the shame that other women—most surprisingly, fellow working mothers—made me feel for not managing my home responsibilities more effectively or, at least, in a manner that did not infringe upon work duties or ability to put in adequate face time. My experience at this liberal arts college left me wondering why working mothers used shame and games of one-upmanship to undermine and, potentially, sabotage each other. It was unfortunate that competition prevailed as the dominant mode of interaction among working mothers when there was so much to be gained from the collaborative pursuit of a shared agenda.

Volunteering at Walgrove, however, has confirmed my hypothesis that an environment where positive affect prevails can foster new, stronger alliances between working mothers. The school’s collaborative environment brings together the affective elements necessary for success: mutual respect, recognition, and appreciation. For me, professional fulfillment can be achieved through the development of a complex web of relationships with others built on a common understanding of a shared goal. Given that working mothers can more effectively build the kind of relationships that enable them to thrive within a volunteer economy, there is an urgent need to address the obstacles in work culture that are preventing these collaborative relationships among women in traditional workplaces.

The larger question remains as to whether this kind of intensive maternal engagement in public schools might signal the emergence of a larger grassroots movement in which women are reinventing their relationships to public institutions, their communities, and each other. My sense is yes, it does: as women transition back from volunteering to paid positions, they will bring with them volunteerism’s values, and on the job they will exert subtle pressure to defend its principles. I like to think of Walgrove as a boot camp for a working women’s utopia, a place for mothers to experiment with how to forge solidarity and a more hospitable work culture for women.

Zara Bennett is a former professor who received her Ph.D. in French and Francophone Studies from UCLA in 2007. Bennett is a CSW Research Scholar, an activist, a writer, and a mother of two. Her current research focuses on the politics of parental engagement in schoolyard greening within the Los Angeles Unified School District.